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This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the project organizers. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

After the Unipolar Moment: Should the US Be a Status Quo Power or a Revolutionary Power?

Current State of the International Order

One of the defining characteristics of the current international order has been the dominant position of the United States, which wields a power that is without historic precedent. Yet it seems that the rapid pace of change and growing complexity of the world has undercut US influence—its ability to bring about the outcomes it seeks.

On February 26-28, 2007, the Stanley Foundation and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) hosted a conference, “After the Unipolar Moment: Should the US Be a Status Quo Power or a Revolutionary Power?” to discuss these issues. Participants came together in Warrenton, Virginia, as part of a larger project seeking to assess the changing role of the United States in the world. At this first in a series of meetings, participants were asked to take stock of the international order, examine how the system’s sustainability can be bolstered against inherent pressures, and identify strategic objectives for the United States to help it navigate these new realities.

In their initial assessment of the international order, participants focused on the United States’ perceived loss of influence and legitimacy in the world. While there was general agreement that the power structure is actually shifting, opinions varied on questions such as how much power is moving away from the United States, where that power is going, how rapidly these changes are happening, and what factors are responsible for these shifts. Indeed, the first-order question is what to look for in an evolving global order: are the key shifts best understood by tracking the formal structures of international relations (alliances, partnerships, inter-governmental organizations) or latent political realities that may be less explicit?

Participants began with the title of the conference itself and asked whether, in light of the current distribution of power, the unipolar moment is actually over. Most agreed that power has yet to shift decisively away from the United States. Even so, there is a trend in this direction, and therefore US leaders must set a policy course to calibrate its specific policies and general attitudes to the changing global power structure. Others argued that the unipolar moment is far from over and that, to the contrary, US power will remain preponderant for years if not decades. Either way, none of the participants tried to deny that global power relations are shifting

and that the United States will sooner or later have to reassess its situation.

There was some debate on the role of the nation-state in the international system and its relative strength in comparison with other actors. Participants discussed whether the nation-state was still the constituent building block of the system or whether we now face an era of weakening states, with transnational actors and networks gaining in influence. Looking at the superpower as the prime example, participants agreed that the United States is still the dominant power in the world, with great influence and a strong role in every region. However, with the increasingly diffuse nature of power in the 21st century, many noted that the international order is becoming much more dynamic, and nonstate actors present serious challenges. Some suggested that the United States is losing influence in part because it is clinging to 20th century, Cold War-era norms of behavior. If it wishes to continue in a position of strength, the United States must become more alert and responsive to changes in the nature of power. A reading of the 2002 National Security Strategy was offered that portrayed the document not as an attempt to perpetuate US dominance, but rather to respond to new challenges in close conjunction with allies.

Participants also pointed out that the apparent decline in US influence is not necessarily new, but that the situation in Iraq may merely have made challenges to the global order more obvious. Hence the United States should not assume it can simply reverse recent policies and return to the position it once held. The trends toward an increasingly diffuse and complex order may be broader than the United States' position in the world, and one that is largely irreversible. The United States would therefore have to adjust to those changes and transform itself in sync with them if it hopes to retain its strong position.

Attitudes Toward Force

Many participants agreed that the question of when force may be used is the critical issue for the cohesion of the rules-based global order. This issue hinges, in turn, on international norms regarding imminent (as opposed to looming or gathering) threats and noninterference in the affairs of sovereign states. These principles were highlighted as basic tenets of the original United Nations system, and it was argued that renovating them will be crucial to strengthening international institutions as

well as rebuilding US soft power. In other words, the fraught debates over preventive war and humanitarian intervention must reach some sort of conclusion. One participant showed the difficulty with preventive war by referring to one of the pillars of just war theory. Preventive war is inherently disproportionate to its target. By definition, a preventive attack is mounted before a threat has fully materialized, and any threshold for action would necessarily incorporate a high degree of fluidity.

There was consensus that the norm of noninterference in internal affairs that held sway during the Cold War has lost all legitimacy as regimes have used it to fend off pressure on genocidal campaigns and other mass atrocities. Yet the adoption as a global norm of the Responsibility to Protect will not be a simple matter, given that China and Russia, two major powers, continue to cling to the traditional noninterference norm.

Participants drew a connection between the noninterference norm and power shifts toward multipolarity. China and Russia use noninterference to win friends in the developing world and carve out spheres of influence as a counter to the norms of human rights and enfranchisement on which US soft power rests. One participant painted a less gloomy picture, pointing out that sovereigntists are less resistant to intervention in failed states. However, the United States and its allies will face continued resistance in their attempts to intervene in functioning states. Powers such as China, Russia, or India will, for obvious reasons, regard outside interference as a slippery slope and will continue to object. Nor is this purely a matter of undemocratic regimes, as the issue also arouses basic feelings of nationalism that populations in many functional nation-states will share regardless of the system of governance under which they live.

Other participants noted the United States will remain hindered in seeking support for intervention—especially, but not only, military—as long as the noninterference norm is made up of a wide, undifferentiated category of state behavior. The key will be to heighten distinctions and gradations. It was suggested that genocide and mass atrocities be distinguished as especially abhorrent and of a different order than other human rights violations, repression, or autocracy. While this would not gain the United States the consensus it desires in every situation, it might be of use in cases of violence where other countries should be ready to assist.

Some participants were skeptical that the United States possesses the political and policy stamina that intervention requires. It was noted that the original concept of the Responsibility to Protect included the “responsibility to rebuild” afterward. One suggestion was to strengthen the US government’s civilian programs for post-conflict reconstruction and other efforts to bolster weak and failing states, an approach that views civilians as a crucial operational force multiplier.

It was suggested that the best starting point for a broader and deeper international consensus is to work on normative principles, which are at least as important as institutions. In order to build consensus, states must establish that certain behaviors will have consequences, and that those consequences will be enforced. Participants saw the United Nations as a venue especially well suited to uphold the Responsibility to Protect. The ideals of the world body emphasize both the freedom of people and the sovereignty of nations, which will somehow need to be reconciled—or at least held in a more constructive tension.

International Institution-Building

A paper written for the conference by Morton Halperin and Michael Fuchs of the Center for American Progress (“The Pillar of the International System”) argued that while maintenance of the global order’s institutional architecture offers no guarantees for the US role, its disintegration would be a disaster. Describing the United Nations as “that symbol and bulwark of humanity’s efforts to improve our world and its hopes for a brighter future,” the authors emphasized its centrality to international relations.

Regarding the use of force, Halperin and Fuchs point out that even when controversial military actions roil the United Nations’ membership, its role as a source of legitimacy is indispensable. In cases when force is undertaken outside the auspices of the United Nations, such as in Kosovo in 1999, the *ex post facto* imprimatur of UN approval is invaluable for an effective operation. The story was the same for the current Iraq war, where the legal basis for US forces in Iraq today is a Security Council resolution.

Citing the international response to the Balkan wars in the mid- and late-1990s—coming after the paralysis in response to the Rwandan genocide—they portrayed the international community as able

to adapt and adopt new norms. The authors also cited the advantages of efficiency and economies of scale the United Nations offers in helping deal with global concerns such as poverty, the environment, and disease, which stretch the resources of many individual governments. The paper also stressed, though, that the United Nations is only as capable and effective as its members allow it to be; the United Nations and other intergovernmental institutions do not possess the power to lead the community of nations. Whatever the fluctuations in the relative power of the United States, some participants argued that it necessarily bears substantial responsibility to lead. The health of the rules-based order would therefore depend on a symbiosis between the United States, international institutions, and the other nations of the world, with the United Nations as a vital forum and instrument.

The question of the relationship between institutions, norms, order, and power raised questions about the very nature of order, how it works, and whether it is at all malleable. One participant argued that a policy cannot look toward outcomes or actions from the international system because it merely exists as an environment, comparable to the natural ecosystem. Any major trends that emerge are a result of factors built into the system, rather than decisions or designs. (Another participant disputed whether the international order can be called a system—in the classical sense of being self-contained, operating according to observable rules, and open to external stimulus.)

Still other participants disputed this fatalistic view and stressed the practical value of the instruments of order, even if they confront formidable challenges. One argued that if there were no norms or institutions, we would be trying to erect some to facilitate international cooperation and fend off anarchy, or at least *ad hoc* and inconsistent action—and that trying to do so from scratch would be extremely difficult. Another said that, given how difficult it is to conduct peacekeeping or state-building, we should be grateful for whatever institutions can help accomplish. A third viewed the main value of institutions and the international order as “shock absorbers,” cushioning the impact of threats and disruptions.

Even with a more modest vision, the problematic relationship between institutions and power and uneven performance of the world community remains. On the one hand, selective enforcement of

laws and norms is bound to have consequences. For example, Security Council authority rests on its ability to make its resolutions stick, and here the record is not strong. It was argued that correct procedure is sometimes emphasized at the expense of substantive ideals and compelling real-world problems and human suffering. On the other hand, even if the Security Council holds no monopoly on the authorization of force, it is meant to play a key role, and US unilateral action undercuts the United States' own ability to push for sanctions and otherwise utilize this instrument. One participant called for a serious domestic political debate over whether a more effective United Nations undermines or enhances US power.

There was a call for developing stronger alternatives to the United Nations, which one participant saw as neither the primary nor most desirable option for international diplomacy. Competitive pressures from other institutions could spur the United Nations to perform better. Other participants argued against this idea, warning both against institutions undercutting each other's briefs as well as potential damage to US centrality and some of the political and philosophical underpinnings of the United Nations and the broader order that the United States favors.

Another point of discussion with regard to institution-building was whether the system has been constructed to cope with globalization and the many stresses of a fast-changing world. Participants noted numerous forces that threaten to destabilize the international order, including the fragmentation of the existing condominium of powers, a potential crisis of welfare models due to economic inequality, a possible breakdown in the relationship between state and capital, terrorism and international crime, and biological and climatological forces. It was suggested that the United States encourage other states to join in adapting creatively to modernity by making pragmatic local adjustments. Although globalization is strongly associated with the United States, it presents shared challenges and opportunities; Al Qaeda, for instance, is both a critic and exploiter of globalization.

Legitimacy

Any discussion of the relationship between authority and influence in the international order must examine the nature and sources of legitimacy. One participant opined that US legitimacy is essentially self-anointed, with the United Nations as an elaborate artifice for international validation, with the

rest of the world acquiescing rather than actively assenting to US authorship and leadership of the global order. Whatever the degree of broader international ownership, a number of conference participants agreed that the United States has lost a great deal of legitimacy in the world through its actions, particularly recently, and that this loss of legitimacy is closely tied to a significant loss of influence in the world. After this shift in the balance of authority, the United States perhaps has an opportunity to prove the universality of the principles it proposes as the basis for order.

Participants highlighted the importance of universal normative standards—uniformly applied, largely obeyed, and consistently enforced—for a sustainable international order. The current institutions and diplomacy for dealing with nuclear proliferation are an example of an unsustainable order. It was observed that the United States is policing the world on an ad hoc basis, using a double standard by tolerating nuclear weapons outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as long as they are in the hands of the “right” people while fighting their acquisition by non-allies. Nor has the United States reduced its own arsenal commensurate with the disarmament provisions of the NPT. Participants suggested that it is crucial to develop a stronger set of standards on these issues that the United States itself will follow as it asks the same of other countries.

While the loss of legitimacy was highlighted as the biggest factor in the deterioration of US ability to influence outcomes—with the loss of moral authority making it easier for other actors to resist—participants wanted to be careful to keep this in perspective. Some questioned whether the United States has really come to be regarded as an all-round wild card, or whether it is simply that other countries disagree with some of its policies. It was pointed out that many countries still ally themselves with the United States despite their dislike of certain policies and that the US lack of legitimacy is not akin to the international order's outliers (sometimes called “rogue states”). A participant described this as “the difference between taking a legitimacy hit and being illegitimate.” The key question is whether or not the United States will continue to have enough political goodwill in the world to draw international help in dealing with threats and challenges. Many participants agreed that US foreign policy must have an explicit legitimacy agenda, including a reem-

brace of legitimacy, an articulation of its definition, and a clear plan to pursue it. One participant stressed the importance of international law for legitimacy and called for the United States to pay much more attention to bolstering norms rather than maintaining a short-sighted focus on convenient self-interests.

Another participant pointed out that legitimacy is generally defined as the acceptance of a ruling power as being just and having the right to rule. In this light, it was suggested that the United States has lost legitimacy because it is viewed as using its position of strength to overstep its bounds and infringe upon the rights of others. Legitimacy fluctuates and shifts over time, just as power and other international dynamics do, and participants reiterated that the United States must pay attention to these dynamics if it hopes to regain some of its lost stature.

If international support and acceptance are critical to legitimacy, it is not purely a matter of the United States' responsibility to persuade, but also the obligations and posture of other nations. This raises the question of whether others may coast on the posture of the United States rather than pitch in to steward their own stake in the rules-based order. A participant helped to resolve this paradox of the common international interest by noting that the majority of nations do share an interest in countering terrorism, weapons proliferation, and extreme poverty, but they have serious differences of approach regarding how to achieve these goals and how much to interfere in a sovereign state's internal affairs.

Guidelines for US Policy

Beyond the broad questions of US legitimacy is the question at the core of this meeting: how should the United States handle its power in today's world? In a paper prepared for this meeting, "Status Quo Power or Revolutionary Power: Can a Proper Balance Be Struck?" coauthors Hans Binnendijk and Richard Kugler discussed the difficult issue of the dual pulls of stability and progress. As they see it, the principal task is to "guide fast-paced changes so that peace and order are preserved and global progress is achieved." The point is not to choose one or the other, but combine them because "a foundation of security and stability will be needed in order for progress to be achieved and, conversely, progress will often be needed in order to preserve peace and order." Another participant referred to "order" and "justice" as the twin strategic objectives.

Balancing the two is a significant practical challenge. One conference participant stressed the importance of "serious analysis rather than ideological reflex." Another said that "the rejection of false, ideologically driven choices leads you to new pragmatic thinking." Kugler and Binnendijk recommended examining policy options with a cost-benefit analysis involving the merits of status quo, desirability of change, feasibility of change, and potential consequences of action.

Many of the questions will be explored further in future sessions, including the following: consequences for the US citizenry of their government's failure to achieve its stated objectives, how the United States should proceed in an environment of constraints, and the meaning of power in today's world. Another question is how to balance traditional vital interests with values and how to discern the global common good on vexing issues.

One participant commented that we will not know for years or decades if the United States actually is in sustained decline; we have seen examples of decline before, such as in Vietnam, and this did not automatically lead to a major power shift. Thus the key may not be to determine whether or not the United States is in decline, but rather how to assess emergent changes and, from that, how to determine the US role. US policymakers do not need a definitive assessment of the state of US power in order to begin developing sound policies. One participant noted that fundamental strategic premises are difficult to discuss in a group as politically diverse as the participants in our meeting. However, these policy challenges can and must be tackled if we are to successfully navigate the evolving international order.

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