



Twenty years after Iraq: evaluating the legacy and impact of George W. Bush's foreign policies

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Abstract

Debates and controversies surrounding the conceptualisation and conduct of US foreign policy during the George W. Bush presidency (2001–2009) are hardy perennials in scholarly discourse. This short introduction to the collection of articles that follows identifies and briefly discusses key underlying and connecting themes: the Bush administration's approach and attitude to multilateralism, the hegemonic unipolarity impulse underpinning its policy approaches, and a consistent interest in great power politics and relations. Appreciating the significance of these can help us to better understand and explain the main drivers behind Bush foreign policies as well as in evaluating the ways and extent to which the latter have continued to influence and inform policy approaches pursued by Bush's three successors to date.

Keywords George W. Bush administration · US foreign and security policies · Multilateralism · Hegemony · Great power politics

In 2005, at an international academic conference, this author was given a first-hand taste of the antipathy that the George W. Bush administration had generated, and continues to generate to this day. A senior scholar fulminated at length about the legitimacy of his presidency, declaring that 'the man does not deserve to be president' and lambasting the way he was elevated to the White House as a 'judicial putsch'. What was striking was less the frustration on show than when it was expressed, coming as it did shortly after President Bush had secured a second term in office by winning the then most votes of any presidential candidate in history, despite his highly controversial foreign and security policies.

Those seeking to examine the record of the Bush years and his Administration's enduring impact and influence are likely to be struck by how quickly such perceptions became entrenched. As Nielsen (2013) notes, it is 'astonishing to what degree

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most Europeans had made up their minds about Bush before he even took Office'. With a small number of revisionist exceptions (Lynch and Singh 2008; Brands and Feaver 2018), scholarly assessments have remained primarily fixed on such first, negative impressions of the Bush presidency.

The contributors to this collection were not specifically invited to consider Bush and his legacy from a revisionist perspective. The articles here seek, firstly, to explain and evaluate the impact of the events of 9/11 on the conceptualisation and conduct of the Bush administration's foreign and security policies including, most contentiously, the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Secondly, our contributors' focus is on assessing the enduring influence of approaches taken by Bush since his presidency ended in January 2009, evaluated through comparative analyses of his three successors to date: Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. In setting the scene, this introduction briefly recaps major themes and issues in the Bush administration's approach to foreign and security policymaking.

From its earliest months in 2001, the Bush administration created the impression of possessing a narrow perception of US national interests, an inherently unilateralist approach to advancing them, and an innate interest in extricating the US from perceived limitations on its freedom of manoeuvre in the international arena (Hurst 2009). It was often portrayed as being insensitive to the interests and opinions of others, even its closest allies, and disregarding of established norms and mechanisms of international law and diplomacy. Critics in Europe and elsewhere, overwhelmingly convinced of the desirability and utility of multilateralism as they understood it, tended to reach for a broad brush in painting this Administration as being uninterested in or uncommitted to such processes. Its approach was reflexively written off as unilateralist, to Bush's own chagrin.¹

Recent contributions to scholarly debates have sought to paint a more nuanced and complex picture to that of the unsophisticated unilateralist unaware of, or unimpressed by, the virtues of multilateral diplomacy and alliance-building (Murray et al 2018; Ryan 2017). Many of the leading players in the Bush administration clearly did not view traditional institution-based multilateralism as an end in itself. Their approach was expedient and informal. Guided by a pragmatic whatever-works-best attitude, the Bush administration adopted what former State Department official Richard Haass has described as an 'a la carte approach'—broadening out chosen mechanisms rather than confronting a more limited (and limiting) choice of either acting alone or within established formal institutional frameworks (Haass 2005, p. 200). This has also been termed 'informal multilateralism',² and it was believed to aid the process of achieving specific policy goals. It sought to avoid what were perceived to be cumbersome, frustrating and potentially inconclusive negotiations and bargaining within formal institutional and organisational frameworks, preferring instead the flexibility afforded by more informal arrangements. These latter

¹ In his memoirs the former president used uncharacteristically intemperate language in stating that allegations of unilateralism 'pissed me off' (Bush 2010, p. 256).

² I am grateful to my colleague David Brown for suggesting and articulating this concept in various conversations.



were often termed ‘coalitions of the willing’ by their proponents and they were put together mainly on the basis of bilateral arrangements with networks of governments and states.

By no means all analysts have been persuaded by such ideas. They have argued that multilateralism, by definition, involves making some form of compromise with partners: in other words, it contains some element of give and take. Bush’s coalitions of the willing, in contrast, involved no significant concessions on the part of the US (though there might be some reward for those who signed up). In the absence of such, the Bush version of ‘multilateralism’ has appeared to critics to be merely a unilateral approach, thinly disguised.

Having demonstrated its willingness to let the nature of the problem dictate the form and parameters of the response, there are several prominent examples of the Bush administration seeking to challenge the rest of the international community, either to follow in its slipstream or to live up to its own rhetoric when confronting security problems. This is evident, for example, in the president’s (in)famous rhetorical challenge to the United Nations regarding Iraq in 2002: ‘will the UN serve the purposes of its founding or will it become irrelevant?’ (Bush 2002). It could also be seen in his willingness to walk away from legitimising a barely reformed UN Human Rights Council when it did not advance his policy objectives.

In the context of the policy areas examined in this collection, a similar approach can be seen with regard to the development of the Six-Party format for prospective denuclearisation negotiations with North Korea, considered by Pak K. Lee. Initially at least, these talks had little US input, with the Bush administration’s objective being more to test China’s willingness to act as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in its own region. In another example, discussed by Anisa Heritage, clear limits were placed on US contributions to, and involvement with, the multilateral Global Fund set up to coordinate international financial efforts to combat HIV/AIDS, even as the president was developing AIDS relief as one of his signature policy initiatives.

On occasion, there was also a sense of apparent multilateralism being employed by the Bush administration as an avoidance mechanism, to give the *impression* of engagement rather than its actuality. In the case of the Middle East Quartet, considered by Martin A. Smith in the context of US engagement with the Israel-Palestinian dispute at the time of the build-up to the Iraq war, as well as the Six-Party denuclearisation format, by broadening the base of negotiations and bringing in other regional and international players, the Bush administration found itself criticised for lack of commitment to *direct* engagement with underlying conflicts and parties. Rather than acknowledging any potential instrumental utility in such innovations, critics were unimpressed and remained convinced that the Bush presidency durably denigrated multilateralism *per se* and on principle.

In this collection, Georg Löfflmann, together with Rubrick Biegon & Tom F.A. Watts in their respective analyses of the Bush administration’s responses to 9/11 on US grand strategy and counterterrorism approaches, emphasise the extent to which the conceptualisation and implementation of the president’s proclaimed ‘Global War on Terror’ (GWOT) was heavily militarised and driven by an underpinning ideological commitment to maintaining US hegemony in the international arena. In 2002, these core premises were formalised in the Administration’s first National Security



Strategy (NSS), which in turn set forth what was widely described as the Bush Doctrine. This was the single most consequential strategy document issued during the entire Bush presidency (as reflected by its prominence in the analysis of many of the contributors here). Its political and operational dimensions were encapsulated by Marcin Zaborowski (2008, p. 11) as comprising ‘self-sufficiency, unilateralism and pre-emption’. As noted, the view that the Bush administration’s approach was straightforwardly unilateralist is challengeable and here, Löffmann, Biegon & Watts, and James Johnson focus more on the significance and influence of a *unipolarist* impulse as the core underpinning of the Bush Doctrine, although they differ on whether the main ideational drivers were recognisably ‘neoconservative’ or reflective of a more traditional assertive American nationalism.

This divergence reflects important debates about the main ideological and ideational drivers of the Bush foreign policy over the course of his two-term presidency (see e.g. Hurst 2005)—and their enduring influence since. Anisa Heritage suggests in her contribution that Bush’s personal religiosity was also an important factor driving the creation and resourcing of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR): a signature programme and ‘act of international compassion worthy of being praised’ (Murray et al 2018, p. 228).

A focus on great power politics was evident in then Governor Bush’s initial foreign policy concept formulated during the 2000 presidential election campaign. This was informed by an approach predicated primarily on great power relations and the US shaping these in ways conducive to advancing and protecting its core interests in the international system, and maintaining a leading edge in the desired unipolar order. These priorities were captured in the rhetorical device of ‘a balance of power favouring freedom’, used by both the candidate and his principal national security aide Condoleezza Rice during the 2000 campaign, and which continued in use after Bush assumed office (Zaborowski 2008, pp. 17–42).

‘Favouring freedom’ suggested an ideological component, albeit one that would be unevenly operationalised. This would become particularly apparent—and enervating—in the context of US–Russia relations. As discussed by Pak Lee, China was treated with relative diplomatic sensitivity, and nudged towards becoming a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the international order, during the Bush presidency. There was no dramatic shift in relations with Beijing on Bush’s watch. While potential for crisis in Sino-US relations remained, diplomacy on both sides, coupled with greater institutionalisation of the bilateral relationship, helped ensure that an initially rocky start with the EP-3 mid-air collision incident was not a taste of things to come.

US–Russia relations, meanwhile, steadily deteriorated as Tracey German details—from effective post-9/11 operational engagement, particularly in counterterrorism, to a new post-Cold War low by the time Bush left office. Part of the explanation for this is down to the Administration becoming more ‘principled’ (in the ideological sense) in its approach. Many observers have noted a shift towards markedly greater pragmatism over the course of Bush’s two terms, with David Addington, Vice-President Dick Cheney’s former chief of staff, describing these as ‘almost two different presidencies’ (Baker 2013, p. 637). This trend was evident, for example, in a willingness to re-engage in the Israel–Palestinian peace process, as Martin Smith describes in his contribution. US–Russia relations moved in a different



direction, however. Practical cooperation on issues of mutual interest, evident in the months after 9/11, was increasingly undermined by the Bush administration's attempt to reframe relations through the ideological prism of the president's second term 'Freedom Agenda' of democracy promotion. This saw increasingly vocal criticisms of Russian governance as well as—from the Russian perspective—interference in states, such as Georgia and Ukraine, which were part of its re-emerging sphere of influence. Coupled with the perceived threat (to Russia) from continuing NATO enlargement, the Freedom Agenda saw growing antipathy between the two powers.

This has contemporary relevance. In the context of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, efforts to appraise the sources and causes of decline in US-Russia relations have assumed a new level of importance, if not urgency. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 during Barack Obama's presidency, and the international response, were channelled in part by the legacy of hostility generated by the perceived threat to the system of governance being built by President Vladimir Putin posed by the American demands for Russian 'democratisation' which were regularly repeated during Bush's second term. Even more pertinent and relevant in this context was the president's insistence that NATO issue a strong statement in favour of eventual membership for both Georgia and Ukraine at its Bucharest summit in April 2008. If the Russo-Georgian conflict, which broke out four months later, was the first war fought over NATO enlargement, the protracted conflict in and over Ukraine from 2014 is the second. Its origins can be traced back directly to decisions made by President Bush during his last full year in office.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there are no conflict-of-interest issues raised by this article.

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