

America is becoming more multilateral. And it needs help.

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For Australian Americaphiles who support Canberra's alliance with Washington but who are opposed to the Iraq war, George Bush's first term in the White House was pretty miserable. The President sloughed off natural allies, squandered his international influence, initiated a foolhardy war, and increased anti-Americanism everywhere.

Australia - the most reliable of US allies, the only country to fight beside America in every major conflict of the 20th and 21st centuries - was certainly not immune from this sentiment.

Fortunately, in the past three years the Administration has changed direction and started running a reality-based foreign policy. Washington co-operated with Paris to get the Syrians out of Lebanon. It joined forces with Asian powers to negotiate a nuclear agreement with North Korea. America's Iran strategy, with its emphasis on working closely with other states and through international institutions such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency, is strikingly different from its earlier approach on Iraq. Many of the formerly dominant neo-cons and ultra-cons have been stripped out of the Washington policy process and are busy losing their jobs in international organisations or losing their liberty in court.

This shift in policy is not due to any Damascene conversion, of course, but rather to a realisation that the Administration's freedom to move has shrunk in tandem with US prospects in Iraq. Nevertheless, it does make life much easier for America's friends and allies - and it should theoretically make it easier for them to support American initiatives.

If the first term was saddening, however, the second term has been maddening. After years of complaining about American unilateralism, much of the world is now ignoring American multilateralism. Opinion polls indicate that anti-American feeling around the globe remains unmoved. People either have not noticed that Washington's approach has altered, or they refuse to give the Administration credit for its grudging about-face. Governments are more alert to the change in Washington's behaviour, but many have been slow to reward it.

Granted, the United States has to accept that Iraq will remain its own special problem. Washington cannot really expect other countries to pull its chestnuts out of that particular fire. It's also true that the European allies have been solid on Iran recently, supporting strong resolutions in the UN Security Council that have had a greater effect on Tehran than most observers predicted.

However, on other threats to international security, the record is more patchy. One example is Afghanistan, where NATO forces are fighting the Taliban, who are hell-bent on reviving their fundamentalist Islamic state. Suicide bombers have appeared in the country for the first time, and last year was the bloodiest since the Taliban were expelled. If Afghanistan were to collapse on itself, it would again become a Petri dish for international terrorism and crime. This would represent a crashing failure for the international system.

Most traditional allies support the US-led, UN-sanctioned effort in Afghanistan. But if most states agree this is a good fight, who's actually fighting it? The truth is that few capitals are prepared to put their people in harm's way. Thirty-seven countries have deployed personnel to Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force but most of the actual fighting is being done by the Americans, Canadians, British, Dutch and Australians. The activities of many of the NATO

contingents are seriously restricted by operational caveats imposed by their capitals - units cannot be deployed outside certain areas, or at night, or in certain weather conditions, or even without an ambulance.

The mission in Afghanistan needs more robust common rules of engagement, a massive infusion of economic resources to develop the country and wean the economy off opium, and more international troops, especially in the south. In other words, it requires more governments to step up and share the burdens and risks that others are bearing in the common interests.

It is time that other countries followed the example of Australia, where both major political parties support a robust Afghanistan deployment.

This does not mean the world should automatically follow America's lead. Sometimes offering counsels of caution is better for all concerned. It surely would have been in Australia's interests - and in the interests of our great ally - if we had asked more searching questions of Washington about its plans for the invasion and reconstruction of Iraq.

But the world cannot forever judge US foreign policy solely on Iraq. If we want Washington to regard its friendships and alliances as valuable, we need to be valuable friends and allies. If we want Washington to work through multilateral means, we have to make sure multilateralism works - which often means working with America, not opposing it at every turn.

The alternative would be to smile at the Bush Administration's sorrows, turn away, and leave all the hard tasks to Washington - but that would only encourage the American unilateralists who got us all into this mess to begin with.

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