The concept of unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy: how useful was it?

What is the concept of «unilateralism» in American foreign policy? How useful was it to the George W. Bush administration in advancing U.S. national interests? Unilateralism has had a long history in the United States of America, but took a special place in foreign policy during the presidency of George W. Bush. Much of the unilateral approach to international security had developed from policies pursued by the Republican majorities in Congress prior to President Bush's election. It was expected that the administration of President George Bush had been pursuing a singularly unilateralist stance since coming to power — a significant change from its predecessor. This article explains the concept of unilateralism and its use in the name of U.S. national interests and investigates to what extent was this concept useful.

Key words: United States of America, unilateralism, Monroe Doctrine, 9/11, Iraq, national interests, George W. Bush, American presidency, war, Persian Gulf, neocons, foreign policy, national security, Bush Doctrine.

Introduction

American unilateralism is a distinct feature of United States foreign policy throughout its existence. It was used in different presidencies for the purposes of advancing national interests such as the pursuit of global primacy and natural resources possession. Instead of being a leader in establishing and strengthening rules and institutions that promote international peace, social justice, and environmental sustainability, the Bush Doctrine places the United States in opposition to them and hypocritically professes in adherence. This term of presidency can be seen as a most provocative, muscular, and pro-active period in American foreign policy.

The aim of this project is to explain the role and impact of concept of unilateralism in the United States foreign policy. The main hypothesis is that unilateral pursuit of national interests as a strong precedent in the George W. Bush administration gave certain advantages like an access to securing the oil in Middle East region, but in long-term perspective it has damaged international reputation of the United States.

The main argument of this project is supported by two chapters:

In the first chapter «The origin, meaning and implications of the concept of «unilateralism» in American foreign policy» the definition of the unilateralism, its role and impact on the American foreign policy is determined. Moreover, it explores the cardinal elements of the Reagan administration — unilateralism,
preemptive war and regime change. The main argument of this part is that how American presidents showed using terrorist tactics acceptable in the name of «national security» and laid the groundwork for the Bush Doctrine’s unilateralism and its war on terror.

The second chapter «The George W. Bush Doctrine, his preventive war. The impact of unilateral policy on the U.S. national interests and international reputation.» explores the origins and content of the Bush Doctrine as a continuity of Reagan’s policy; analyzes unilateralism as a key element in U.S. foreign policy during his presidency and highlights how did the 9/11 transform Bush’s approach. All this comes from National Security Strategy of the United States of America.

The second section continues with the consequences of George W. Bush’s unilateralism. It argues that in short term the United States had advanced their national interests and had a lot of benefits on controlling the access to oil; however, in long term the unilateral policy wasn’t useful due to the American influence in world affairs to be weakened: the war in Iraq has added immeasurably to hostility toward the US, even among ordinarily pro-US publics.

**Chapter 1. «The origin, meaning and implications of the concept of «unilateralism» in American foreign policy»**

One of the oldest concepts in United States foreign policy is unilateralism — a tendency to act independently in making decisions in international relations, rooted in the colonial experience of the country.

The balance of power as an instrument for maintaining stability has been rejected by the United States and this concept was accounted as one of the significant causes of conflicts. This viewpoint has remained in the present and is displayed in a huge variety of situations in international system[1; 61].

The unilateral actions are central in United States policy throughout the history and most pronounced in the 19th and 20th centuries. «The American unilateralism approach to problem-solving is rooted in the colonial experience of the nation, watered by its first encounters with European diplomacy»[1; 63]. The examples of it are the Open Door policy towards China, the Monroe Doctrine, multiple interventions in Central America and Middle East, ABM Treaty and Kyoto Protocol[2; 28].

In words of David A. Malone unilateralism «refers to a tendency to opt out of a multilateral framework or to act alone in addressing a particular global or regional challenge rather than choosing to participate in collective action»[3; 3].

Some states refuse to act in either multilateral way or unilateral way due to their preferences to avoid being subjected to the underlining principles of international rules, norms and values [3; 3].

As was mentioned above unilateralism gives a state the right to act alone for pursuing its own national interests with no necessity to take into account interests of other nations and states even in case of ally-states. Following their unilateral policy, the United States of America made decisions such as which nation will be the next ally, with the purposes and duration of that cooperation[4; 115]. The United States are convinced that they have higher purpose in serving to the global politics than other states. Their mission was «to protect liberty and to promote freedom» by American isolationist unilateral policy from the rest of the world without involving in it [2; 30].

Going to the end of the World War II, one of the most influential Japanese diplomats has claimed that «the United States pursued a policy of «unilateral globalism», providing public goods in the form of security, opposition to communism, an open global economy, aid for economic development, and stronger international institutions. Now it is pursuing a policy of «global unilateralism», promoting its own particular interests with little reference to those of others. The United States is unlikely to become an isolationist country, withdrawing from the world. But it could become an isolated country, out of step with much of the world»[5; 541].

Only starting from nineteenth century, the United States made a significant shift by involving other states in its unilateralism character politics. Many researchers account the Monroe Doctrine as a continuity of Jefferson's unilateral ideas. In other words we can say that the Monroe Doctrine eliminated existed isolationist unilateralism and substituted with completely unilateral approach[4; 118].

The first action was in 1823 when President Monroe aimed to remove the United States from European disputes thereby not taking part in it. The Monroe Doctrine modified thinking about the United States role and their responsibilities about intervention actions in the 20th century towards the neighbors in hemisphere[2; 30]. The Monroe Doctrine embodied the developing diplomatic intentions of unilateralism distinct to American nation's determination to follow their own way in global politics without other countries' participation. Even though the Monroe Doctrine made clear the American aspiration to imply independently of judg-
ment in their foreign policy, the United States did not have enough facilities to convert the Monroe Doctrine into policy in the field [1; 62].

During the Carter presidency the role of the United States was undermined. Therefore Reagan's policy was focused on stopping the fall of American power and reconstructing the United States of America as a country that cannot be walked round [6; 280]. Hence, President Reagan gives a new dimension for «regime change». His improvement of unilateral actions and preemptive wars on states with terrorist threat was a basis for the Bush Doctrine. Ronald Reagan was the one before Bush who justified anti-terrorist military interventions for the higher purposes of «national security» [7; 34].

The Reagan's unilateral policy was the basis for President Bush's administration in making decisions in the field of the national security. He accepted the staff responsible for national security issues such as Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, nicknamed the Vulcans, also Reagan was the one who made the «unilateralism, preemptive attack, and regime change» active in American foreign policy. Exactly Reagan implemented tactics in struggle against terrorism and external threats [7; 37].

Both hegemonists Cheney as neoconservative and Rice as realist were convinced with the rule of power — in the regime change and in some cases penalizing the adversaries unilaterally [7; 37]. The terrorist act on 9/11 was profitable for unilateralists to modify the meaning and purposes of United States foreign policy, in which the American government claims that they are not seeking to become the new empire [7; 37].

In comparison to American policy in 19th century with seeking liberty, the United States foreign policy in 20th century was focused on promotion of democracy and making the global society safe for democracy [2; 31]. In the twentieth century the international political system has radically changed. The global politics is always seen as power and struggle for power. In comparison to Cold War era with bipolar world, modern situation is more sophisticated. Since the Washington and Jefferson presidencies Unilateralism as the underlying principle of American foreign policy has always been based on national self interest.

In the beginning of 20th century this facilities enhanced and was able to implement unilateral inclinations. For instance, the American unilateralism was pronounced during the World War I, when the United States joined and Britain, France and Russia, however decided to refuse to be with them an ally [1; 63]. During the World War II, the United States considered themselves obligated to act in unilateral way, despite the possibility of threat from the Axis aggression. The complete dimension of the issue would become more visible after 1945. The past five decades the unilateralist approach has been introduced as continuous and disputable topic in American foreign policy, particularly in case of ally states [1; 63].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold war, when the world has become unipolar the United States of America was able to influence on other countries government. During the Clinton presidency nobody wanted to pay high costs or take the risks of unilateral policy in a global society [5; 546]. In accordance with Charles Krauthammer [8; 552]: «There is now only one superpower. But that does not mean that the world is unipolar». After Soviet Union collapse being the only one superpower gave the United States the responsibility to decide what measures should be taken in global politics.

For better understanding of unilateral actions and pressure on other countries 12th Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott said in address to the issue of American power: «In a fashion and to extent that is unique in the history of Great Powers, the United States defines its strength — indeed, its very greatness — not in terms of its ability to achieve or maintain dominance over others, but in terms of its ability to work with others in the interests of the international community as a whole... American foreign policy is consciously intended to advance universal values» [5; 542].

Chapter 2. «The George W. Bush Doctrine, his preventive war. The impact of unilateral policy on the U.S. national interests and international reputation»

The second chapter examines the background, essence and the controversial role of «Bush Doctrine». Many argue that there are four main factors that shape George W. bush Doctrine: «preventive war, confronting the nexus of weapons of mass destruction and catastrophic terrorism, regime change for rogue states and democracy promotion» [9; 16]. It was highlighted in the public speeches and variety of publications during Bush's first term of presidency.

Clinton's foreign interventions, nation-building and missions in the aims of peace-keeping were declined by Bush in favor of advancing the United States national interests. During the first term of Bush Jr many claimed that he is going to continue his father's business from 1991 in Iraq, and 9/11 was more convenient way to act than the response to terrorism threat [10; 81].

The main role in the Bush Doctrine was the Middle East region with a big quantity of natural resources, which created a range of regional issues [11; 114]. Robert Zoellick [12; 68] claimed that United States for-
eign policy principle during Bush presidency «is premised on power, being neither ashamed to pursue America’s national interests nor too quick to use the country’s might». Krauthammer [8; 556] thinks that his viewpoint has become stronger that «the United States is now more powerful than any other power in history but this world is unlikely to be safer, however, as new threats emerge from rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction».

Many argue that after 9/11 a lot of new United States Doctrines have came and the first one states the «with us or against us» ultimatum in address to any state which will try to help, abet or harbor terrorists [8; 11].

Unilateralism in post-9/11 has activated for the unipolarity system the first crisis. In relations to that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld [13] with regards to the war in Afghanistan and other wars on terrorism with the universal principle claimed that «the Coalition Must Not Determine the Mission». Hence the United States «take our friends where we find them, but only in order to help us in accomplishing the mission. The mission comes first, and we decide it».

The new form of unilateralism determines their interest much broader in terms of national security and defense than previous. Particularly, it distinguishes two basic United States interests: promoting the global peace by implementing democracy and protecting the peace in global world [8; 15].

After George W.Bush was accused in constant intensions to intervene in Iraq, he responded [14]: «prior to September 11, we were discussing smart sanctions… After September 11, the doctrine of containment just doesn’t hold any water… My vision shifted dramatically after September 11, because I now realize the stakes, I realize the world has changed».

The preventive war deliberate need is very close to the unilateral actions of the Bush Doctrine. The origin of unilateralism is deepened in Reagan’s administration and is based on traditions of American foreign policy and has been the significant part of Bush viewpoint. Robert Jervis argues that «the strong opposition of allies to intervening in Iraq was an advantage as well as a disadvantage to Bush» [15; 372].

Stephen Burman [10; 81] has pointed two reasons «to believe that the invasion of Iraq was premeditated. First, in contrast to the first Gulf War, when George Bush Sr. took great care to build a multilateral coalition through the United Nations, and developed a model for post-Cold-War policing that was genuinely non-imperial, prior to the second war, the United Nations was manipulated and treated with contempt, and the USA acted much more unilaterally and imperially. The second reason is that, while both interventions had a common principal motive — securing supplies of oil — it has become apparent that overthrowing Saddam was only the first step in a plan to transform the Middle East».

After establishing unilateral policy in post-9/11, the anti-Americanism influence has been observed to increase and closely connected to Bush's actions in the global politics. The event of 9/11 has made the Bush's administration to re-evaluate the role of United States as a «reluctant sheriff». The treaties that were accounted as an injury to the US national interests were abandoned or withdrew by the American administration or in another case just left with no participation of United States.

In accordance to Schlesinger [16; 49], unilateralism does not have completely the same meaning as «isolationism», however it is accounted as a form of internationalism and therefore represents «the oldest doctrine» of all in United States foreign policy.

The military actions in Afghanistan were seen as a war on terror, when intervention in Iraq in 2003 showed the Bush Doctrine preemptive war supremacy [11; 116]. George Bush in his post-9/11 speech presented his administration's status: «Our nation will continue to be steadfast and patient and persistent in the pursuit of two great objectives. First, we will shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans, and bring terrorist to justice. And, second, we must prevent the terrorist and regimes who seek chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the world» [17].

John Ikenberry [5; 567] in his book has argued that «Since the Gulf War could not have taken place had the Soviet Union remained a major force in the Middle East, it could be interpreted as the United States assuming the role of armed policeman of the world in those instances when its national self-interest or security are involved — in this case, oil — but not in other parts of the world. To fight for freedom and stability in an area of the world that has yet to experience either».

The National Security Strategy [18] of the United States starts with: «The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom — and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise». The spread of these values opens the path to «make the world not just safer but better, a path that is not America’s alone. It is open to all».
The American foreign policy formed a coalition to start the war in the Gulf in purposes of protecting the access to the oil justifying it in the name of Kuwait freedom.

The main feature of the Bush administration such as regime change has led to significant concern in the Middle East region [11; 116]. Robert Singh [9; 26] focused on three key problems in the Bush Doctrine: «First, and despite its commonsense logic, preventive was posed more problems than it solved. Not only did the Doctrine risk forfeiting the legitimacy of American action through its manifestly unilateral character, but it also risk spreading wars through its wider appropriation. Second, regime change raised profound questions about the limits of state sovereignty that neither Bosnia nor Kosovo in the 1990s, nor Iraq in the 2000s, resolved. Third, the embrace of American pre-eminence was deemed problematic. For some critics, this was simply the «arrogance» thereby implied. For others, the case was one of both «overstretch» and excessive demands that could more plausibly be met by a more equitable international balance of power».

The two modern coercion instruments that United States is using nowadays are military intervention and economic sanctions. The economic sanctions work effectively only in case of international support of other countries. Therefore there are two ways of scenario: the United States implements the sanctions unilaterally and damage their relations with their allies or they do not implement sanctions what can be seen as weakness of United States on international arena. The United States actions lead their country to become alone in the world due to speaking and making decisions on behalf of «the international community» [5; 548].

Unilateral both ways of coercion: sanctions and interventions are the causes of United States foreign policy disasters. Many critics argue that American leaders should withdraw from their «unipolar world hegemon» role, which will serve in positive way for United States interests and other countries all over the world. The United States should choose the path of using their superpower and resources in unipolar world in aims of providing efficient cooperation and unity amongst other countries to cope with global threats in ways that answers the American national interests but not injuring their image on the international arena [5; 549].

**Conclusion**

The unilateralism is one of the oldest concepts in the United States foreign policy and has been practiced throughout the American history. The unilateral policy involves the independent actions on international arena without taking into account any other ally states. The most distinct period of presidency is the presidency of George W.Bush with his unilateral war on terror after 9/11. This term of presidency can be seen as a most provocative, muscular, and pro-active period in American foreign policy.

During the Bush presidency the line between national security and defense was almost erased, which is not new for the United States practice, however, broadening the limits of «preemptive action» and strong belief in its higher purposes in war against terrorism were innovative.

All the features of American unilateralism in global politics has undermined the image of the United States and has led to the loss of their closest partners, but during the intervention in Iraq, the United States had the access to securing oil, which satisfied Bush administration during that period.

**References**

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АКШ сырытқы саясатындағы бір бағыттылық концепциясы: бул қаншалықты пайдалы болды?

АКШ сырытқы саясатында бір бағыттылық тұжырымдамасы дегеніміз не? Бұл концепция қаншалықты Джордж Буш қағидалығын ұлттық мүлікті алға тартуда комек берді. АКШ тарихында бір бағыттылықтың ұлт уақытын құрайтын ғына сырытқы ұлттықтарының дене берсем екінші Дж.Буш президентінің уақытында оның сырытқы саясаты ұрпақ ерекше болды. Қауыйтарлық қақандықта бір бағыттылық сырытқы ұлттық бойынша іс істеуге дейін. Конгресі, республиканықтардың өдісіне саясаты ұлттық адамдар жасога қалайды. Құқығы, білікке келген адамдар ғына оның қаншалықты бір бағыттылығы сингулярдас түрде колданып, дәл көбейе болатын, бір немесе дәлі немесе басыңызмалар салыстырында біршама мәнінен езегері емдеуге қабылданады. Бұл мәні емделеді, бірақ созылған концепциясы мәнінен ұсынғанда, оның пайдалы деңеңіз анықталған.

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Концепция односторонности во внешней политике США: насколько полезным это было?

Автором показано, что такое «концепция односторонности» в американской внешней политике, насколько эта концепция помогла администрации Джордж Буша в продвижении национальных интересов? Отмечено, что односторонность имеет долгую историю в США, но особое место она занимала во внешней политике во время президентства Джорджа Буша-младшего. Определено, что большая часть одностороннего подхода к международной безопасности была разработана с учетом политики, проводимой большинством республиканцев в Конгрессе еще до выборов президента Буша. Объяснено, что от Джорджа Буша ожидалось, что его администрация будет преследовать сингулярно одностороннюю позицию после прихода к власти (значительное изменение по сравнению с его предшественником). Автором исследованы концепция односторонности и исследовано, в какой степени эта концепция была полезна.