

Two Cheers for Clinton's Foreign Policy.

by Stephen M. Walt

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UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES

"It's the economy, stupid." Back in the 1992 campaign, that one line told us that Bill Clinton did not intend to be a great foreign policy president. As his second term ends, most pundits agree that this is one promise he has kept. Critics on the right argue that he is too eager to accommodate a rising China, too blind to Russia's corruption and cronyism, and too slow to use force against states like Yugoslavia or Iraq. On the left, liberals bemoan Clinton's failure to prevent the genocide in Rwanda, his tardy response to the bloodletting in the Balkans, and his abandonment of his early pledge to build a multilateral world order grounded in stronger international institutions. Even pragmatic centrists find him wanting, deriding his foreign policy as "social work" that is too easily swayed by ethnic lobbies, public opinion polls, and media buzz.

There is some truth in all these charges, but the indictment should be qualified in several respects. As with any president, it is easy to think up ways that Clinton's record might be improved. But on the whole, he does not deserve the chorus of criticism he has received. Clinton's critics fail to appreciate how changes in the international position of the United States have complicated the making of its foreign policy. The next president will face similar pressures and is likely to adopt similar policies -- but is unlikely to achieve significantly better results. Clinton's handling of foreign policy also tells us a great deal about what to expect in the future, regardless of what happens in November.

THE HALF-HEARTED HEGEMON

Bill Clinton has had to face a world vastly different from the one his predecessors knew. The end of the Cold War has left the United States in a position of unprecedented preponderance. America's economy is 40 percent larger than that of its nearest rival, and its defense spending equals that of the next six countries combined. Four of these six countries are close U.S. allies, so America's advantage is even larger than these figures suggest. The United States leads the world in higher education, scientific research, and advanced technology (especially information technologies), which will make it hard for other states to catch up quickly. This extraordinary position of power will endure well into this century.

America's unrivaled strategic position has several important but paradoxical implications for the conduct of foreign policy. First, U.S. preponderance gives it

tremendous freedom of action. Because the United States is so secure and has such a large surplus of economic and military power, its leaders can pursue objectives that no other state would contemplate. This situation stands in marked contrast to the Cold War, when the Soviet threat gave U.S. leaders a clear set of priorities and imposed discipline on the conduct of foreign policy. But with the Soviet Union gone, U.S. leaders can pursue a wide range of goals without worrying very much about how others will respond.

Of course, if the United States throws its weight around too often, other states will question the desirability of U.S. leadership and look for opportunities to undermine it. Such tendencies are already visible in Russia and China, but even traditional U.S. allies like France and Germany would like to keep a tighter grip on Uncle Sam's leash. But efforts to balance U.S. power have been remarkably muted thus far, largely because the United States is far from the other major powers and does not threaten them physically. In the short term, therefore, the United States faces few external constraints.

Second, America's favorable position also means there is less to be gained on the international stage. The United States is already the dominant power; it has no serious enemies in its own hemisphere; and its most obvious adversaries -- Iraq, North Korea, and Yugoslavia, for instance -- are weak, impoverished, and isolated. American ideals of free markets and individual rights are more widely accepted than ever. Although any number of problems merit U.S. attention, America simply does not face the sort of imminent geopolitical challenge it often faced in the twentieth century. Thus the central paradox of unipolarity: the United States enjoys enormous influence but has little idea what to do with its power or even how much effort it should expend.

Third, America's preponderance has caused most of its citizens to lose interest in foreign affairs. In a 1998 survey by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations that asked Americans to name "two or three problems facing the country today," foreign policy issues did not even make the list. When asked to identify "two or three foreign policy problems facing the nation," the most common response (21 percent) was "don't know." Support for military spending, foreign aid, and multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank has declined steadily throughout the 1990s; even the familiar U.S. commitments to NATO, Taiwan, and South Korea receive less support than at any time in recent memory. Fewer than half of U.S. citizens favor the use of ground troops should Iraq invade Saudi Arabia. Other familiar causes for using U.S. troops --

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such as an attack on Israel or a North Korean invasion of South Korea -- have even less backing. These statistics do not, of course, tell us what U.S. leaders would actually do in a crisis, but the erosion of public support for an activist foreign policy is striking.

U.S. preponderance and the state of public opinion are inextricably linked. Americans are not interested in foreign policy because they recognize how favorable the current situation is. So they elected a president who promised to spend less time on the phone with foreign leaders and more time on domestic issues, and they elected a Congress whose disdain for foreign affairs is almost gleeful. Two-thirds of the Republicans elected to Congress in 1994 reportedly did not possess passports, and Majority Leader Richard Armey (R-Tex.) has proudly declared that he has no need to visit Europe because he has "already been there once." This nativist Congress has cut the budget allocation for international affairs, tried to sanction foreign firms trading with Cuba, held U.N. dues hostage to extremist views on family planning, and dragged its heels in financing key U.S. commitments to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Middle East peace process.

Finally, the declining interest in foreign affairs increases the relative weight of special interest groups, especially those with narrow and extremist agendas. Without a major threat to focus the national mind, any president will face more powerful pressure from groups with strong, focused positions. Catering to narrow interest groups will gain their support without alienating the rest of the electorate (which is largely indifferent) or incurring immediate foreign policy consequences. In the absence of a clear and present danger, partisan politics intrudes more heavily in the conduct of foreign affairs -- because using foreign policy to bash one's rivals doesn't place the nation in immediate danger.

Thus, the problems that Clinton's critics emphasize are not solely attributable to his disinterest in foreign affairs, the misguided views of his advisers, a disorganized policy process, or a failure to set clear priorities. Rather, they stem from America's unusual international position and the political incentives this position reinforces. Nor should we forget that Clinton began his presidency with a weak mandate and delicate relations with the military. He has had to grapple with a Republican Congress that is increasingly partisan, openly skeptical of many international institutions, wary of new commitments, and wedded to strategic chimeras such as national missile defense (NMD). Any president would have found it difficult to conduct foreign policy under these conditions. It is against this background that Clinton's performance should be judged.

Four goals have dominated the Clinton administration's foreign policy. First, the administration has sought to dampen security competition and reduce the risk of major war in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, largely by remaining militarily engaged in each of these regions. Second, the administration has worked to reduce the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Third, it has tried to foster a more open and productive world economy, which it correctly sees as an important component of U.S. economic prosperity. Fourth, the administration has tried to build a world order compatible with basic American values by encouraging the growth of democracy and by using military force against major human rights abuses.

These goals are hardly controversial. Indeed, they are virtually identical to the foreign policy priorities of Republican frontrunner George W. Bush. Furthermore, an administration that made significant progress on most, if not all, of these goals would normally be regarded as successful, particularly if it had to overcome major obstacles to achieve them. With that standard in mind, how well has Clinton done?

ENGAGING THE WORLD

The United States has an enduring interest in peace, because a major global conflict would threaten its preeminence. The Clinton administration's preferred strategy for preserving peace has been to keep the American pacifier in Europe and Asia while maintaining cordial relations with other great powers and supporting regional peace efforts where appropriate. This strategy rests on the belief that America's forward military presence is still the most reliable barrier against renewed great-power rivalries. But since public support for this policy is fragile, Clinton has limited America's direct role and encouraged key allies to bear a heavier burden. Despite many obstacles, the administration has pursued this strategy effectively.

In Europe, the Clinton administration has held NATO together despite growing centrifugal tendencies and intense policy disputes. Clinton has forcefully reiterated the U.S. commitment to Europe, and his foreign policy team masterfully orchestrated NATO's expansion into Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The strategic wisdom of this step is arguable, but it was extremely popular in Europe and bolstered support for NATO back home. The administration also guided NATO through its military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, despite numerous interalliance disputes.

These achievements are especially impressive considering how much harder it is now to keep the alliance together.

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During the Cold War, NATO stayed intact largely because the alliance did not actually have to do anything as long as its members were not attacked. But since 1991, NATO has assumed the broader responsibility of guaranteeing peace and security throughout Europe. Now when violence erupts in places such as Bosnia or Kosovo, NATO cannot remain aloof without casting doubt on its own credibility. Compelling NATO to act in such circumstances, however, forces the alliance to develop a common approach to problems for which there is rarely an obvious solution. Thus, not only is NATO busier now than in the past, it is acting in situations where consensus will be very difficult to achieve.

Second, the end of the Cold War removed the principal glue binding Europe and America, which inevitably raises doubts about the depth and durability of the U.S. commitment. Fully aware that Americans are reluctant to fight and die for Europe, Clinton has tried to shift more responsibility to U.S. allies and commit U.S. ground troops only when Europeans clearly cannot handle the job themselves. Thus, the administration initially wanted to rely solely on airpower in Bosnia, despite strong British and French opposition, and it indirectly supported Croatia and the Bosnian Muslims to convince the Serbs to negotiate. The United States did take the lead in negotiating and implementing the 1995 Dayton agreement, but it reduced its military presence in Bosnia faster than its NATO allies did.

Similarly, the United States led the air campaign in Kosovo but has let the U.N. and Europeans handle much of the burden of peacekeeping and reconstruction. Given the American public's reluctance to take on ambitious foreign policy goals and the potential calamity of an intervention gone awry, Clinton's approach was both prudent and appropriate.

In Europe, the administration has struck a delicate balance between doing too much and not doing enough. Doing too much encourages Europeans to "free ride" and jeopardizes American support; doing too little makes Europeans doubt U.S. credibility and fuels their desire to possess a more potent military capability. Many Europeans are clearly tiring of their dependence on America and are also worried about U.S. credibility, which explains their renewed effort to forge a more formidable defense capability. But this is hardly Clinton's fault. Rather, it reflects the growing worldwide recognition that Europe should handle most of its own regional security problems without calling for American assistance -- and the growing sense that this would leave both parties better off.

Clinton's handling of the major Asian powers deserves high marks as well. As in Europe, the administration's

overarching goal has been to maintain its existing alliance commitments in Asia and preserve its forward military presence. A cornerstone of this effort was the reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in April 1995, which defused Japanese concerns about the U.S. military presence and offered a powerful symbol of America's continued engagement in Asia.

Despite a rocky start, Clinton's China policy has been an effective combination of engagement and deterrence. The administration took office committed to pressing China on its human rights record. But it soon learned that a confrontational approach did little for human rights and, instead, threatened the entire U.S.-Chinese relationship. Since then, Clinton has sought to keep China's emergence as a major power from undermining key U.S. interests -- without creating a counterproductive spiral of growing hostility. Accordingly, the United States has sought to emphasize the benefits of cooperation by renewing China's "most favored nation" trading status and supporting -- after faltering once -- China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the same time, it has tried to emphasize the costs of confrontation -- as during the deployment of two U.S. carrier battle groups following China's misguided attempt to use long-range missile tests and military maneuvers to intimidate Taiwan.

This strategy has worked well. Clinton has done nothing to appease China and much to provoke it, yet bilateral relations have not deteriorated significantly. Since 1993, the United States has renewed its defense ties with Japan, permitted Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to make a controversial visit to Cornell University, engaged in an overheated, intensely partisan debate about Chinese nuclear espionage, and bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Yet Beijing's responses have been largely symbolic. Clinton even managed to get Chinese approval to send a new U.S. ambassador to Beijing and convinced China to agree to America's WTO-entry terms. On balance, therefore, Clinton got China just about right. And although the Republicans have repeatedly condemned the president's China policy, George W. Bush's stated views on China are very similar to Clinton's.

In terms of great power politics, the most serious blemish in Clinton's record is America's deteriorating relationship with Russia. By almost any measure, conditions within Russia and the state of U.S.-Russian relations have declined significantly during Clinton's presidency. Corruption and bureaucratic thievery have decimated the Russian economy and slowed the emergence of liberal institutions, while anti-Western sentiment has been fueled by NATO expansion, the gradual American assault on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and U.S. indifference to Russian interests in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the

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Caspian basin. These policies lead critics to charge that Clinton has focused on minor areas and issues at the expense of more pressing strategic problems, thus squandering the opportunity to establish a lasting, cooperative relationship with a former rival.

There is considerable truth to these accusations, but they ignore several mitigating factors. First, Clinton is hardly to blame for the slow pace of Russia's democratization or its continued economic difficulties; that responsibility lies primarily with the Russians themselves. The United States and its allies could probably have done more to hasten Russia's transition. But the real missed opportunity was America's failure to support large-scale privatization in 1991-92, when reformers were ascendant in Russia -- and George Bush was president. Moreover, Clinton can take credit for establishing a good relationship with former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and for helping him defeat reactionary challengers in the 1996 election. Yeltsin was hardly an ideal leader -- as his vanishing popularity showed -- but he was far better than the alternatives that Clinton's policies helped avert.

Furthermore, in the most recent Russian election, voters expressed a greater commitment to democracy and an eagerness to emulate Western-style institutions -- a major achievement after 1,000 years of autocracy and more than 70 years of communist dictatorship. Russia's transition has been slower than was hoped for, but the trends are in the right direction. And U.S. policy has helped.

Second, although relations between Moscow and Washington have deteriorated over the past seven years, they hardly constitute a "new Cold War." Joint efforts to control Russia's nuclear materials continue, Russian troops are supporting NATO forces in Bosnia, and Russia eventually helped end the Kosovo war last year. Even though Clinton has damaged U.S.-Russian relations, he has tried to limit this damage through diplomatic gestures such as the NATO-Russian Founding Act and by muting U.S. criticism of Russia's heavy-handed military campaign in Chechnya.

U.S. policy toward Russia illustrates the temptations and pressures that have shaped Clinton's entire tenure. Because the United States has been so strong and Russia so weak, Clinton has been able to ignore Russian sensitivities whenever doing so brought immediate political benefits. NATO expansion shored up the alliance in Europe and appealed to ethnic voters back home, and Clinton's commitment to missile defense proved that Democrats were not lax on defense. Because Russia could do little to resist either of these initiatives, short-term political calculations won out over long-term strategies.

Finally, Clinton's policy of engagement helped advance the search for peace in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Progress has been slower than ideal, but the situations in both areas are substantially better than they were when Clinton took office. U.S. mediation played a key role in keeping each peace process on track, and the administration deserves some credit for the progress that has been made. U.S. engagement has helped keep the peace in Europe and Asia and has helped build peace in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. This is not a record that requires an apology.

AVOIDING DOOMSDAY

Like its predecessors, the Clinton administration has sought to reduce the threat of WMD, a goal that enjoys widespread public support and is clearly in the U.S. national interest. Although not perfect, the administration's record is positive considering the heavy domestic opposition. First, Clinton's team successfully persuaded Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to give up the nuclear arsenals they inherited from the former Soviet Union. It also placed Russia's nuclear materials under more reliable control. Much remains to be done, but greater progress was thwarted partly by counterproductive congressional restrictions, Congress' reluctance to authorize additional funds, and the chaotic conditions in Russia.

A second achievement was the successful ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, transfer, and use of chemical weapons. The treaty was signed in the closing days of the Bush administration, and Clinton submitted it for Senate ratification in November 1993. He finally prevailed in April 1997, after a sustained effort to overcome conservative opposition. Russia followed suit soon after, thereby taking on the obligation to destroy the world's largest chemical weapons arsenal by 2007. Given America's conventional military superiority, eliminating chemical weapons is very much in the U.S. national interest, so the administration deserves credit for this achievement.

A more controversial and revealing accomplishment was the protracted effort to dissuade North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons. After consideration of a preemptive strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities in 1994, cooler heads prevailed, and the administration eventually crafted a diplomatic solution. North Korea agreed to cease plutonium production at the Yongbyon research reactor, and the United States, Japan, and South Korea agreed -- under appropriate international safeguards -- to provide North Korea with two light-water reactors for its power needs. Hard-liners have criticized Clinton for rewarding North Korea's defiance of the

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nonproliferation regime, but they have yet to offer an alternate policy that would have achieved as much with as little. A preemptive air strike might well not eliminate North Korea's nuclear capability. Moreover, both South Korea and Japan opposed the use of force. South Korea was especially worried that a preemptive strike would spark a destructive ground war. Given these constraints, the situation called for flexibility, persistence, and creativity; the administration displayed them all. Without the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea would almost certainly have obtained enough fissile material for a sizable number of nuclear bombs. Heading off such a destabilizing development was clearly in the U.S. interest. The administration recently followed up with a new initiative designed to discourage North Korean missile development and ensure that it remains nuclear-free. Given the limited array of options and the potential for disaster, Clinton's handling of North Korea is an impressive diplomatic achievement.

Clinton's efforts to reduce the danger of WMD, unfortunately, have not been entirely successful. He failed to convince the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in October 1999. This step undermined the long-standing U.S. effort to slow nuclear proliferation, reinforced foreign concerns about American unilateralism, and made it easier for China, India, and other nascent nuclear powers to develop weapons as sophisticated as America's. Clinton and the Senate Democrats deserve some blame for mishandling the issue, but the principal culprits are the Senate Republicans, who sacrificed an important foreign policy issue on the altar of partisan politics.

The administration also failed to dissuade India and Pakistan from testing nuclear weapons in the spring of 1998. And Clinton did not prevent the collapse of the U.N. Special Commission's (UNSCOM) weapons inspections in Iraq. Yet it is hard to see how the United States could have forestalled either development. India and Pakistan have been moving toward nuclear testing for decades, and U.S. leverage over both countries was limited. The same is true in Iraq: neither economic sanctions nor repeated U.S. air strikes have had much effect on Iraqi behavior in the past, and U.S. efforts to compel Iraqi compliance gradually undermined international support for the entire policy. Nonetheless, UNSCOM was not a total failure. It dismantled much of Iraq's WMD capability and hindered its efforts to reconstitute its military arsenal. But it was never a workable long-term solution to Iraq's military ambitions, and Clinton should not be blamed for its demise.

Clinton can also be criticized for conceding to Republican pressure over NMD. In particular, Clinton's decision to sign the National Missile Defense Act of 1999 -- which commits

the United States to deploy such a defense "as soon as it is technologically possible" -- exemplifies the president's political suppleness and shows how U.S. preponderance empowers extremist thinkers at home. Although even a limited deployment could fuel an arms race with China, derail efforts to reduce the Russian nuclear arsenal, and poison relations with key U.S. allies, Clinton chose to compromise largely to avoid being accused of softness on defense. Clinton's policy was neither courageous nor farsighted, but it was precisely the sort of decision that the political environment encouraged.

Despite its scattershot record on WMD, the administration's instincts have been correct, and many of its policies have reduced the direct threat of WMD to the United States. Its principal mistakes have come in response to partisan pressure at home, which reflects an inability to control the national debate on issues like the CTBT or missile defense.

A LIBERAL WORLD ECONOMY

Clinton took office vowing to focus "like a laser beam" on the economy, and even his sternest critics must concede that the U.S. economy has boomed during his tenure. Clinton's economic strategy included an intense effort to lower trade and investment barriers, which he pursued vigorously despite considerable opposition from his own party. His specific achievements include the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the completion of the Uruguay Round of trade talks, and a host of bilateral trade agreements. The results speak for themselves: despite the negative effects of the Asian financial crisis, expanding exports accounted for more than 20 percent of U.S. GDP growth from 1992 to 1999.

Clinton's economic team also skillfully handled the Mexican peso crisis in 1994. When Congress balked at funding a support package to Mexico, Clinton used his executive authority to take money from the Exchange Stabilization Fund (ESF). In bypassing Congress, Clinton staved off a potentially ruinous collapse of the Mexican economy -- and at no cost to U.S. taxpayers.

Once again, Clinton's team managed a key element of foreign policy despite a marked absence of political backing. Congress consistently denied Clinton the "fast-track" authority to conduct trade negotiations (an authority granted to every president since Richard Nixon), and it retaliated against Clinton's handling of the peso crisis by placing new restrictions on the ESF. These restrictions made it far more difficult for the administration to react quickly when the Asian financial crisis hit. Republicans further impeded efforts to respond to the crisis by dragging their heels on the administration's

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request for additional IMF funding.

Domestic politics also played into the administration's most important errors in foreign economic policy. The first mistake was the Clinton administration's rejection of China's April 1999 offer to enter the WTO. Clinton dropped the deal because he feared congressional opposition, although he later reconsidered and was able to resurrect the agreement in November 1999. The second blunder occurred at the ill-fated Seattle WTO summit last December, where Clinton sought to appease a variety of domestic interest groups by calling for strengthened labor standards, possibly enforced by trade restrictions. This initiative clearly departed from the administration's earlier commitment to trade liberalization, reinforcing global concerns about U.S. unilateralism. The failure in Seattle is unlikely to derail the long-term trend toward global economic integration, but it was hardly the administration's finest moment. Despite a marked lack of congressional support and Clinton's own willingness to pander to domestic forces, however, the president's economic record is one his successor is likely to emulate and certain to envy.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Another early promise of the Clinton administration was to focus on human rights and rely more on multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations. Humanitarian operations have indeed been a prominent element of Clinton's foreign policy -- most notably in Bosnia and Kosovo -- and his rhetorical commitment to these goals remains strong. It is therefore ironic that his performance here is probably weaker than in any other realm of foreign policy.

On the positive side, the administration can claim several clear human rights successes. According to Freedom House, the level of freedom worldwide has expanded significantly during Clinton's presidency, and the number of states where human rights and civil liberties are respected has reached its highest level ever. Although Clinton can hardly claim full credit for this trend, his willingness to keep humanitarian issues in the public eye helped reinforce the growing global norm limiting what sovereign governments can do to their own citizens.

Clinton also deserves praise for his handling of the 1994 crisis in Haiti. Although he was criticized for failing to respond forcefully, his threat to invade Haiti both convinced the ruling junta to leave voluntarily and successfully restored President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power. This prevented a bloodbath and an exodus of Haitian refugees to Florida, and it was also a clear humanitarian success. Haiti remains a poor and deeply

troubled society, but it is better off than it would have been had the United States done nothing.

The administration's more ambitious humanitarian efforts present a more ambiguous picture. In Bosnia, for example, the United States was slow to respond to widespread human rights abuses and was visibly reluctant to place its forces in harm's way. To Clinton's credit, he ultimately recognized the failure of this policy; the United States subsequently took the leading role in fashioning the 1995 Dayton agreement, which brought an end to the violence in Bosnia. But the U.S. response came very late, and NATO has been unable to craft a workable formula that would secure peace and permit its forces to withdraw. Indeed, by rejecting the possibility of ethnic partition and insisting that the long-term goal be a democratic and multiethnic Bosnia, the United States has committed outside forces to Bosnia for years to come.

Similarly, although NATO's intervention in Kosovo has been hailed as a triumph of allied cohesion and humanitarian principles, Clinton's handling of the situation was hardly a model of farsighted statecraft. By issuing an ultimatum at the Rambouillet conference that Serbia was certain to reject, the United States most likely provoked what could have been an avoidable war. Moreover, Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright badly underestimated Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's resolve and were caught off guard when NATO's bombing campaign led Milosevic to accelerate the expulsion of Albanians in March 1999. That error was compounded by the West's decision to eschew a ground option in the early stages of the fighting.

In the end, NATO compelled Serbia to withdraw its forces and was able to claim victory. But the Serbs gained several nontrivial concessions in the final settlement. Additionally, Kosovo is proving to be as difficult for NATO and the U.N. to control as it was for Belgrade. Although Clinton's aides managed the war skillfully and may have prevented an even larger humanitarian tragedy, they bear some responsibility for causing the war itself and failing to anticipate the larger consequences. The war in Kosovo convincingly demonstrated Clinton's ability to manage the alliance, but it was only a limited success on its original human rights grounds.

If the human rights record in the Balkans is ambiguous, the record elsewhere contains several clear failures. The first is Somalia, where a successful U.N. relief effort was sabotaged by political conflicts within Somalia and by the Clinton administration's attempt to arrest a particular Somali clan leader. By undermining public support for humanitarian operations, the error in Somalia paved the way for an even more tragic failure in Rwanda. Despite

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clear signs that mass slaughter was being planned there, the United States helped derail the U.N. peace effort. The result was the most costly humanitarian tragedy since the Khmer Rouge massacres in Cambodia and might have been prevented had the United States acted promptly. President Clinton acknowledged these mistakes during his visit to Rwanda in 1998, but his admission merely underscored the seriousness of the error.

As for Clinton's pledge to rely more heavily on international institutions, both he and his team seemed genuinely committed to "assertive multilateralism." But this policy was soon abandoned, and Clinton has generally acted precisely as one would expect from the leader of the world's largest power -- relying on international institutions when they suit U.S. purposes but criticizing or ignoring them when they do not.

Thus Clinton was quick to blame the U.N. for the debacle in Somalia, and he engaged in a recurring war of wills with U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. The United States used its diplomatic clout to oust Boutros-Ghali in 1996, an action that failed to appease congressional critics and did nothing to strengthen public support for the U.N. as a whole. Clinton also used force against Serbia without specific Security Council authorization, thereby undermining his rhetorical commitment to international law. The administration rejected the international convention banning land mines and the proposal to create an international criminal court, placing the United States at odds with nearly all its allies and putting it in the company of regimes like North Korea's and Libya's.

Clinton's reversal should not surprise us. As the world's sole superpower, the United States has little interest in agreements that might limit its freedom of action and is especially wary of international agreements that might complicate its ability to meet current military commitments. The U.S. military opposed the land-mines treaty and the international criminal court largely for this reason, and Clinton was not about to incur the Pentagon's wrath. Similarly, the United States was hardly going to let a Russian veto in the U.N. Security Council derail the Kosovo campaign, especially when America could claim to be acting multilaterally through NATO.

This instrumental attitude toward existing institutions may come back to haunt the United States once it is no longer as dominant and would like to limit the actions of other states just as they now want to constrain U.S. behavior. But that date will not arrive until long after Clinton has left office. Although one can bemoan his failure to build a more benign world order, we should be neither surprised by his choices nor deluded into thinking that another president would have acted differently.

THE DISGUISED CALCULUS

President Clinton's handling of international institutions and multilateralism illustrates the central irony in his handling of foreign policy, namely, the degree to which he departed from his initial idealism and embraced realpolitik. In 1992, candidate Clinton declared that "the cynical calculus of pure power politics is ill-suited to a new era," but his policies as president have shown an ample appreciation for the realities of power. Under Clinton, the United States consolidated its Cold War victory by bringing three former Warsaw Pact members into its own alliance. It shored up its alliances in East Asia and readied itself for a possible competition with a rising China while encouraging Beijing to accept a status quo that favored the United States. It rejected the land-mines treaty and opposed the creation of an international criminal court while moving steadily closer to the construction of NMD. It forced its allies to bear a greater share of the burden in Europe and East Asia while insisting on leading both alliances. And together with its NATO allies, it asserted the right to intervene in the sovereign territory of other states, even without Security Council authorization. Clinton may cloak U.S. policy in the rhetoric of "world order" and general global interests, but its defining essence remains the unilateral exercise of sovereign power.

This tendency to disguise power calculations is hardly surprising. Americans do not like to think of themselves as practicing realpolitik, but they do like being number one. At the same time, Americans do not want to expend blood and treasure if they don't have to. Perhaps Clinton's greatest achievement is that he has done so well at so modest a cost to the United States. Clinton's strategy is hegemony on the cheap, because that is the only strategy the American people are likely to support. In this sense, Clinton's presidency illustrates the temptations and constraints likely to bedevil his successors.

The foreign policy of the Clinton administration has been well suited to an era when there is little to gain in foreign policy and much to lose. The American people recognize this and have made it clear they want neither isolationism nor costly international crusades. Bill Clinton is nothing if not sensitive to the vox populi, so he has given his fellow citizens the foreign policy they wanted -- something they have clearly recognized and appreciated. Pundits may carp and Republicans may complain, but the American people judge his stewardship of foreign policy to be "outstanding," according to polls conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. That is why his successor is likely to follow in his footsteps, no matter what is promised between now and January 2001, and no matter which party wins.

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