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How Washington Should  
Reform International Institutions

*Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth*

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# Reshaping the World Order

## How Washington Should Reform International Institutions

*Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth*

CREATING A LEAGUE of democracies, revamping the UN Security Council, revitalizing the nuclear nonproliferation regime—proposals for revising international institutions are all the rage these days. And for good reason: no one sitting down to design the perfect global framework for the twenty-first century would come up with anything like the current one. The existing architecture is a relic of the preoccupations and power relationships of the middle of the last century—out of sync with today’s world of rising powers and new challenges, from terrorism and nuclear proliferation to financial instability and global warming.

It is one thing to agree that change is needed, but quite another to settle on its specifics. As soon as the conversation shifts to brass tacks, competing visions begin to clash. In an anarchic world of self-interested states—that is to say, in the real world—the chances that those states will cooperate are best when a hegemon takes the lead. There are, of course, good reasons to question whether the United States, the only contender for such a role today, is up to the task. Under the George W. Bush administration, consideration of global institutional change fell

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through the cracks. The administration did not invest much in international institutions and tended to denigrate them for hindering, rather than enabling, the realization of U.S. interests. But with the election of President Barack Obama, the United States' reluctance to push for institutional change now appears to have ended. In a 2007 address to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Obama stressed that "it was America that largely built a system of international institutions that carried us through the Cold War. . . . Instead of constraining our power, these institutions magnified it." "Today it's become fashionable to disparage the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international organizations," he continued. "In fact, reform of these bodies is urgently needed if they are to keep pace with the fast-moving threats we face."

Some would argue that the United States' window of opportunity for fostering institutional change has closed. In today's "post-American world," the thinking goes, surely only an idealist would suggest that Washington retains the power to lead the way out of the current institutional impasse. And even if the United States were somehow able to come up with enough hard power to spearhead reform, skeptics question whether a hegemon that has squandered so much goodwill in eight years of unilateralism and rule breaking would have many followers.

Nonetheless, there are hardheaded reasons to believe that the United States has the means and the motive to spearhead the foundation of a new institutional order. It still has the power and legitimacy such an effort would require, as well as a strong incentive to mount it, because overall, international institutions channel the United States' power and enhance its security. If Washington wants to succeed, it should follow a strategy that highlights the benefits of the institutional revisions, links the proposed order to the current one, and uses the United States' power position to persuade other governments to sign on to reform. This approach to pursuing institutional change presents a challenge for diplomacy, but one that many of history's hegemons have met in order to smooth the path to reform. And it is a challenge worth taking up if the United States wants to maximize the prospects for a peaceful, prosperous twenty-first century.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

EVEN A RUTHLESSLY self-interested United States should want a robust framework of international institutions, which include not just formal organizations and treaties but also informal rules and standards of legitimacy. Why? Because institutions facilitate the United States' own global leadership. Clearly, it is far easier to manage the world economy with an effective World Trade Organization (WTO). Less obvious but just as significant are the manifold ways that international institutions help the United States advance its security interests. Marshaling "coalitions of the willing" is an inefficient approach. Each new coalition requires striking a new set of bargains with different partners and offering them new carrots and sticks. Within an established institution, in contrast, states develop habits for working together. Having an institution in place to facilitate cooperation on one issue also makes it easier for the participating states to rapidly achieve cooperation on a related issue. NATO's intelligence-sharing network was designed in the Cold War to gather information on the Soviet Union, for example, but later was quickly adapted to deal with the unforeseen issue of global Islamist terrorism.

Institutions are no panacea. They do not obviate the need for tough negotiating between states. But they do tend to center the bargaining on how the burden of cooperation should be shared rather than on whether cooperation should occur at all—a focus that is preferable for the United States. The United States may be frustrated that other members of NATO are not contributing more to the mission in Afghanistan, but it is far better to have this particular conversation than to debate whether countries such as France and Germany should make any contribution at all.

As interdependence among countries intensifies and the list of global problems that the United States cannot resolve on its own grows, the benefits of international institutions will increase. Many current problems require continuous attention rather than one-shot solutions. To prevent terrorism, for example, the world will need to establish a reliable and efficient set of controls for monitoring borders. Such an effort will work only if appropriate standards are widely adopted and cooperation in implementing them becomes routine. Even if it turns out that the

United States is less vulnerable than other states to new global problems—such as the augmented threat of infectious diseases and greater flows of refugees from conflicts in Africa—it is clearly better off in a world with institutional structures that establish standards to address them.

The world's growing complexity means that governments place a premium on accumulating information in order to meet today's challenges. Although the United States is able to gather a great deal of information on its own, it sometimes wastes resources by unknowingly duplicating the efforts of its allies. And when it possesses only partial information, its work must be combined with that of other countries. Routinizing the sharing of data within global institutions can help with both problems. Moreover, information about topics such as nuclear programs, which are sensitive, may only be available via international organizations, whose perceived impartiality and wider inspection access often put them in a better position to secure it.

Institutions can also reduce the need for states to actively manage the international system, thereby lessening the sometimes irksome perception that U.S. power is being exercised. The U.S. government

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has a strong interest in gaining as much information as possible about Iran's nuclear program, for example. Conveniently for Washington, the International Atomic Energy Agency is directing the effort; absent the IAEA, the United States would be forced to burn up resources and political capital to procure such information and would likely be much less successful. In

short, the more the network of global institutions protects the interests of the United States, the less Washington needs to employ its power in ways that provoke resentment among other governments.

The Bush administration largely failed to recognize the benefits of international security institutions. It consistently emphasized that working through them could be inefficient for the United States (claiming that they impose coordination costs and make it harder to conduct military operations) and might allow other states to tie down the American Gulliver in a web of constraints. Although it would be a mistake to ignore these downsides, of course, it is an even greater

one to fail to recognize that leading powers benefit from setting up and working within international institutions.

Realist statesmen such as George Kennan and realist scholars such as Robert Gilpin have shown that institutions generally enable leading states more than they constrain them. Although admittedly lonely voices in the realist camp, they have argued that institutions are effective tools of the powerful. From this perspective, the extensive discussion of institutions as constraints during the Bush administration undoubtedly stuck most observers outside the United States as being overwrought. Given the United States' power and potential for going it alone, its partners within institutions recognize that Washington generally stands to lose the least when cooperation fails—and this awareness often pushes them toward the United States' position. When the constraints become excessive in a particular institution, the United States is sufficiently powerful that it can pull back from cooperating without prejudicing its general ability to sustain cooperation within other institutions in other areas. Even when the dispute in the UN over Iraq reached its greatest intensity in 2003, French and German diplomats did not alter their approach to negotiations with the United States over the WTO. States are well aware that the United States has a strong interest in furthering the WTO and that this interest exists independently from its interests in, and approach to, the UN. It is also well understood that, more than any other state, the United States has a greater ability to retaliate when others withdraw cooperation in an attempt to punish the United States for its behavior in a given institution.

Realists tend to appreciate the use of power but are skeptical of the importance of institutions. (Liberals, for their part, appreciate the importance of institutions but are frequently skeptical of using power to reshape them.) But the benefits of international institutions are grounded in realism: it will be harder for the United States to advance its national interests if it does not invest in them.

#### THE 1 + X WORLD

IT WAS only by ignoring the benefits of institutions and overestimating their costs that neoconservatives in the Bush administration were able to dismiss the role that they can play in fostering U.S. global leadership.

Unencumbered by these doubts about the usefulness of institutions, the United States is likely now to push for reform. And that is no small matter. Institutional change is much more likely when there is a dominant state with the legitimacy to lead and the capabilities necessary to help overcome problems of collective action. The question is, Does the United States have the power and the legitimacy today to succeed?

Only a few years ago, pundits were absorbed in debates about American “empire.” Now, the conventional wisdom is that the world is rapidly approaching the end of the unipolar system with the United States as the sole superpower. A dispassionate look at the facts shows that this view understates U.S. power as much as recent talk of empire exaggerated it. That the United States weighs more on the traditional scales of world power than has any other state in modern history is as true now as it was when the commentator Charles Krauthammer proclaimed the advent of a “unipolar moment” in these pages nearly two decades ago. The United States continues to account for about half the world’s defense spending and one-quarter of its economic output. Some of the reasons for bearishness concern public policy problems that can be fixed (expensive health care in the United States, for example), whereas many of the reasons for bullishness are more fundamental (such as the greater demographic challenges faced by the United States’ potential rivals).

So why has opinion shifted so quickly from visions of empire to gloomy declinism? One reason is that the United States’ successes at the turn of the century led to irrational exuberance, thereby setting unreasonably high standards for measuring the superpower’s performance. From 1999 to 2003, seemingly easy U.S. victories in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq led some to conclude that the United States could do what no great power in history had managed before: effortlessly defeat its adversaries. It was only a matter of time before such pie-in-the-sky benchmarks proved unattainable. Subsequent difficulties in Afghanistan and Iraq dashed illusions of omnipotence, but these upsets hardly displaced the United States as the world’s leading state, and there is no reason to believe that the militaries of its putative rivals would have performed any better. The United States did not cease to be a superpower when its policies in Cuba and Vietnam failed in the 1960s; bipolarity lived on for three decades. Likewise, the United States remains the sole superpower today.

Another key reason for the multipolar mania is “the rise of the rest.” Impressed by the rapid economic growth of China and India, many write as if multipolarity has already returned. But such pronouncements mistake current trajectories for final outcomes—a common strategic error with deep psychological roots. The greatest concern in the Cold War, for example, came not from the Soviet Union’s actually attaining parity with the United States but from the expectation that it would do so in the future. Veterans of that era recall how the launch of Sputnik in 1957 fed the perception that Soviet power was growing rapidly, leading some policymakers and analysts to start acting as if the Soviet Union were already as powerful as the United States. A state that is rising should not be confused with one that has risen, just as a state that is declining should not be written off as having already declined. China is generally seen as the country best positioned to emerge as a superpower challenger to the United States. Yet depending on how one measures GDP, China’s economy is between 20 percent and 43 percent the size of the United States’. More dramatic is the difference in GDP per capita, for which all measures show China’s as being less than 10 percent of the United States’. Absent a 1930s-style depression that spares potential U.S. rivals, the United States will not be replaced as the sole superpower for a very long time. Real multipolarity—an international system of three or more evenly matched powers—is nowhere on the horizon. Relative power between states shifts slowly.

This tendency to conflate trends with outcomes is often driven by the examination in isolation of certain components of state power. If the habit during the Cold War was to focus on military power, the recent trend has been to single out economic output. No declinist tract is complete without a passage noting that although the United States may remain a military superpower, economic multipolarity is, or soon will be, the order of the day. Much as highlighting the Soviet Union’s military power meant overlooking the country’s economic and technological feet of clay, examining only economic output means

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putting on blinders. In 1991, Japan's economy was two-thirds the size of the United States', which, according to the current popular metric, would mean that with the Soviet Union's demise, the world shifted from bipolarity to, well, bipolarity. Such a partial assessment of power will produce no more accurate an analysis today.

Nor will giving in to apprehension about the growing importance of nonstate actors. The National Intelligence Council's report *Global Trends 2025* grabbed headlines by forecasting the coming multipolarity, anticipating a power shift as much to nonstate actors as to fast-growing countries. But nonstate actors are nothing new—compare the scale and scope of today's pirates off the Somali coast with those of their eighteenth-century predecessors or the political power of today's multinational corporations with that of such behemoths as the British East India Company—and projections of their rise may well be as much hype as reflections of reality. And even if the power of nonstate actors is rising, this should only increase the incentives for interstate cooperation; nonstate threats do not affect just the United States. Most nonstate actors' behavior, moreover, still revolves around influencing the decisions of states. Nongovernmental organizations typically focus on trying to get states to change their policies, and the same is true of most terrorists.

When it comes to making, managing, and remaking international institutions, states remain the most important actors—and the United States is the most important of them. No other country will match the United States' combination of wealth, size, technological capacity, and productivity in the foreseeable future. The world is and will long remain a  $1 + x$  world, with one superpower and  $x$  number of major powers. A shift from  $1 + 3$  to  $1 + 4$  or  $5$  or  $6$  would have many important consequences, but it would not change the fact that the United States will long be in a far stronger position to lead the world than any other state.

#### THE LEGITIMACY TO LEAD?

FOR ANALYSTS such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, the key reason for skepticism about the United States' ability to spearhead global institutional change is not a lack of power but a lack of legitimacy.

Other states may simply refuse to follow a leader whose legitimacy has been squandered under the Bush administration; in this view, the legitimacy to lead is a fixed resource that can be obtained only under special circumstances. The political scientist G. John Ikenberry argues in *After Victory* that states have been well positioned to reshape the institutional order only after emerging victorious from some titanic struggle, such as the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, or World War I or II. For the neoconservative Robert Kagan, the legitimacy to lead came naturally to the United States during the Cold War, when it was providing the signal service of balancing the Soviet Union. The implication is that today, in the absence of such salient sources of legitimacy, the wellsprings of support for U.S. leadership have dried up for good.

But this view is mistaken. For one thing, it overstates how accepted U.S. leadership was during the Cold War: anyone who recalls the Euromissile crisis of the 1980s, for example, will recognize that mass opposition to U.S. policy (in that case, over stationing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe) is not a recent phenomenon. For another, it understates how dynamic and malleable legitimacy is. Legitimacy is based on the belief that an action, an actor, or a political order is proper, acceptable, or natural. An action—such as the Vietnam War or the invasion of Iraq—may come to be seen as illegitimate without sparking an irreversible crisis of legitimacy for the actor or the order. When the actor concerned has disproportionately more material resources than other states, the sources of its legitimacy can be refreshed repeatedly. After all, this is hardly the first time Americans have worried about a crisis of legitimacy. Tides of skepticism concerning U.S. leadership arguably rose as high or higher after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and during Ronald Reagan's first term, when he called the Soviet Union an "evil empire." Even George W. Bush, a globally unpopular U.S. president with deeply controversial policies, oversaw a marked improvement in relations with France, Germany, and India in recent years—even before the elections of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany and President Nicolas Sarkozy in France.

Of course, the ability of the United States to weather such crises of legitimacy in the past hardly guarantees that it can lead the system in the future. But there are reasons for optimism. Some of the apparent

damage to U.S. legitimacy might merely be the result of the Bush administration's approach to diplomacy and international institutions. Key underlying conditions remain particularly favorable for sustaining and even enhancing U.S. legitimacy in the years ahead. The United

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States continues to have a far larger share of the human and material resources for shaping global perceptions than any other state, as well as the unrivaled wherewithal to produce public goods that reinforce the benefits of its global role. No other state has any claim to leadership commensurate with Washington's. And largely because of the power position the United States still occupies, there is no prospect of a counterbalancing coalition emerging anytime soon to challenge it. In the end, the legitimacy of a system's leader hinges on whether the system's members see the leader as acceptable or at least preferable to realistic alternatives. Legitimacy is not necessarily about normative approval: one may dislike the United States but think its leadership is natural under the circumstances or the best that can be expected.

Moreover, history provides abundant evidence that past leading states—such as Spain, France, and the United Kingdom—were able to revise the international institutions of their day without the special circumstances Ikenberry and Kagan cite. Spain fashioned both normative and positive laws to legitimize its conquest of indigenous Americans in the early seventeenth century; France instituted modern concepts of state borders to meet its needs as Europe's preeminent land power in the eighteenth century; and the United Kingdom fostered rules on piracy, neutral shipping, and colonialism to suit its interests as a developing maritime empire in the nineteenth century. As Wilhelm Grewe documents in his magisterial *The Epochs of International Law*, these states accomplished such feats partly through the unsubtle use of power: bribes, coercion, and the allure of lucrative long-term cooperation. Less obvious but often more important, the bargaining hands of the leading states were often strengthened by the general perception that they could pursue their interests in even less palatable ways—notably, through the naked use of force. Invariably, too, leading states have had

the power to set the international agenda, indirectly affecting the development of new rules by defining the problems they were developed to address. Given its naval primacy and global trading interests, the United Kingdom was able to propel the slave trade to the forefront of the world's agenda for several decades after it had itself abolished slavery at home, in 1833. The bottom line is that the United States today has the necessary legitimacy to shepherd reform of the international system.

A STRATEGY FOR REFORM

UNFORTUNATELY, to acknowledge that revising the institutional order has happened frequently in the past and that the United States retains the power and legitimacy to lead this effort reveals nothing about how to do it. What is the best way for Washington to go about the job? From centuries of state practice and academic theorizing, five general precepts have emerged that are especially relevant to the United States today: play up the reciprocal benefits of the proposed reform, make sure the revised framework provides public goods, link the proposed order to the current order, strategically exploit inconsistent objections to the proposals, and persuade others that change is needed.

First, institutional reforms are more likely to be endorsed if their benefits for all participants are highlighted. Given that reciprocity is one of the basic principles underlying the current institutional order, the more states are convinced that they stand to benefit under a new or revised institution, the less they will be inclined to object to it. The Proliferation Security Initiative—a U.S.-sponsored multilateral framework for interdicting weapons of mass destruction at sea, in the air, and on land—is the most prominent recent example of this dynamic. Although the PSI was designed to give the U.S. Navy more operational latitude, the Bush administration regularly referred to it as a “global effort.” The initiative explicitly created new *de jure* rights for other parties, even though *de facto* only the United States gained any new rights. For example, the PSI-related bilateral treaty between the United States and Liberia accords each country the right to board, search, and detain the cargo of any vessel on the high seas that is flying the other country's flag and is suspected of trafficking in weapons of

mass destruction—even though Liberia (which has the second-largest shipping registry in the world) has no navy. A related move is to create reciprocal rights for others to exercise in the future. A classic example is President Harry Truman's 1945 unilateral declaration extending the United States' jurisdiction over the resources of the continental shelf adjacent to its territorial waters. This assertion of a completely novel right was an unquestionable violation of international law, but other coastal states followed suit so swiftly that the new right assumed the status of customary law within a few years.

Any institutional change should also be sure to provide public goods, such as stifling terrorism or stabilizing the global economy, in order to remind other states of the benefits of U.S. leadership. What constitutes a public good is not always straightforward, so the United States needs to persuade others that what it is supplying is important. If the United States proposes an institutional shift that does not seem to provide a public good in one area, it can potentially overcome any resistance by providing public goods in other areas. In short, the less self-interested the United States seems in general, the more likely other states will be to support its proposed institutional revisions.

Linking proposed changes to widely accepted parts of the current order is another proven strategy for institutional reform. The probability that an institutional change will succeed depends in part on its consistency with the wider order, and so the United States should use its diplomatic and intellectual resources to persuade others of the reform's strong links to well-established precedents. U.S. actions under Bush did reflect some sensitivity to this precept. For example, then Undersecretary of State John Bolton, the U.S. official who spearheaded the PSI, made a point of stressing that it built on "existing nonproliferation treaties and regimes" and was "consistent with national and international legal authorities and international law."

Advocates of serious institutional change would be wise to make sure their proposals are consistent with their past positions and to strategically exploit the inconsistencies of their opponents' arguments. When proposing reform, the United States needs to think about possible objections from other states and then seek to minimize their legal force. The more the goals of the proposal seem to contradict the United States' other positions in other contexts, the more hypocritical and self-serving

the United States will appear. At the same time, the United States should frame the institutional change in ways that make objections from the most important states seem inconsistent with their past positions. The Bush administration executed this strategy with some success when it devised new rules to combat terrorism. UN Security Council Resolution 1373, for example, transformed a raft of U.S.-sponsored antiterrorism measures into formal and legally binding international commitments. To many observers, this represented an effort to revise accepted customary international law in a manner that advantaged the United States, which can send its military nearly anywhere, and potentially disadvantaged weaker states, which lack such a capacity and could find themselves accused of harboring terrorists. But Washington was able to portray these objections as inconsistent with many governments' previous pronouncements about the overarching need to combat terrorism, and these governments ultimately did not block Resolution 1373; the end result was an enhanced ability to respond to terrorist threats.

Finally, when seeking to revise existing institutions or create new ones, reformers must persuade other states that the changes are both necessary and wise. In its calls for reform, the United States should not limit itself to purely legal arguments. It should also convince other key states that changing global circumstances require the fixes it proposes. In this regard, the Bush administration performed remarkably poorly. A hallmark of U.S. foreign policy under Bush was a systematic devaluation of persuasion, argument, and diplomacy. When crafting its new preventive-war doctrine, for example, the Bush administration failed to consult other governments. One French defense official recalled that in the old days, high-level U.S. officials would travel to Paris for extensive consultations over any new NATO policy, even when the change had already been approved in Washington and further substantive alterations were impossible. "We found out about the Bush doctrine by downloading it from the White House Web site," he noted. "The doctrine has much to recommend it, but that is not the

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way to communicate with allies.” To effectively promote institutional change, the United States does not have to persuade every state, but it does need to win over those influential actors whose decisions will sway many others.

#### REGIME CHANGE

THE WORLD is awash in new challenges that the current international order is ill equipped to handle. Most observers have long recognized that international institutions need to be adapted to these new challenges. (If any doubts remained about this, they should have been quieted by the recent global financial crisis.) And it is this acknowledged need for revised or new institutions that opens up a great deal of space for the United States to remake international institutions.

Institutional change is never easy, and the United States is not omnipotent. But it is up to the task. Even the Bush administration, obviously disinclined to invest in the revision or creation of international institutions, was strikingly successful when it tried. This was true even when it came to institutional initiatives that were clearly shaped by U.S. negotiators to best align with U.S. interests, such as the PSI.

Institutions redesigned to meet today’s challenges are clearly in the United States’ long-term interest. Imagine, for example, a world in which a revised Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty no longer granted all states an “inalienable right” to build nuclear enrichment and reprocessing facilities (which can be quickly converted for military use) but rather forbade such facilities in countries other than those where they already exist, while guaranteeing to all states access to low-level fissile material at a fair price. This would draw a clear line, sorely lacking today, between peaceful and warlike nuclear programs. It is an easy step from this hypothetical world to one in which there is a strong norm against any new nuclear fuel reprocessing. Any state that attempted to do this would be considered a pariah—lacking the respect and rights due to legitimate members of the international community. In such a world, states would be much less likely to pursue nuclear weapons, and if any did, the path to taking tough antiproliferation measures would be clear.

The ability to take such measures would also be enhanced if an alternative forum for coordinating economic sanctions were created. Reaching agreement in the UN on decisive sanctions against proliferating states remains difficult because of the UN's broad membership. It might be beneficial to have a mini multilateral institution (think of NATO in Kosovo or Afghanistan) that coordinates economic sanctions among key U.S. allies, not just NATO members but also countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement have great value, but these existing multilateral regimes focus only on export controls. A mini multilateral institution could be used to rapidly implement broad-based economic sanctions against nuclear proliferators. Having such a sanctions institution in place might well create just the sort of competitive pressure that would spur UN action. Failing that, coordinated sanctions by the members of NATO plus Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which together account for two-thirds of global GDP, could place enormous economic pressure on a potential nuclear proliferator.

Updating the current architecture of international institutions, which are so out of sync with the modern world, is imperative if new global challenges are to be met and the national interests of the United States are to be best advanced. No other state is in such a favorable position to promote institutional shifts, and the United States will not always have this opportunity. The time to seize it is now. 🌐