

# **In Defense of Multilateralism**

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## INTRODUCTION

Multilateralism has been increasingly accepted as the *modus operandi* in world politics, and in global environmental politics in particular. Over the last few decades, nations have come to realize that the challenges of security, peacekeeping, disease control, human rights violations, and pollution, among others, are too vast and complex for any nation or group of nations, no matter how powerful, to effectively manage on its own. Of the many global issues that would be best managed through multilateral cooperation, a significant number are environmental in nature. Jean-François Rischard puts the number of inherently global issues at around twenty, six of which, he says, are issues surrounding the global commons.<sup>1</sup> Because of the truly global nature of these issues, the actions or inaction of every country affect the well being of all countries and peoples, and no country is able to address these issues alone.

In the past few years, however, multilateralism has come under fire, as the world's greatest sovereign power has chosen to disregard that cooperative norm when it has found it convenient to do so. "Since 1990, skepticism has increased in the U.S. foreign policy community about the value of multilateralism in the country's global engagement."<sup>2</sup> Arguably, it was disregard more than skepticism that the Bush administration demonstrated in April 2003 when it chose to ignore international consensus and the will of the United Nations Security Council by invading Iraq. In so doing, the U.S. flagrantly bypassed the multilateral norms and institutions designed to lend authority and legitimacy to such actions. Although the military nature of this particular unilateral action allowed it to capture headlines throughout the world, the decision to invade Iraq was not the first, and likely not the most damaging, decision in the current administration's history of non-compliance.

The Bush administration's circumvention of international cooperative norms and institutions has notably included the refusal to cooperate with multilateral efforts to govern the global commons in order to curb the degradation of our global resources and work toward a sustainable future. In March 2001, President George W. Bush declared the Kyoto Protocol "dead," signifying his decision to abandon the treaty completely (the United States is the only major carbon dioxide emitter to have rejected the Kyoto process). The international community responded with the Marrakech Accords – an effort to clarify several details of the treaty, which would have made compliance less burdensome to the U.S. – but President Bush "shunned" these negotiations.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Bush has since introduced his own domestic air pollution legislation, under the misnomer of "Clear Skies." Although the legislation calls for reductions in the emissions of three pollutants,

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<sup>1</sup> Rischard, Jean-François. *High Noon: Twenty Global Problems, Twenty Years to Solve Them*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, 65-66.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick, Stewart. "Multilateralism and Its Discontents." *Multilateralism and US Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*. Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman, eds. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, 13.

<sup>3</sup> DuBof, Richard. "Mirror Mirror on the Wall, Who's the Biggest Rogue of All?" *ZNET*. August 7, 2003. <http://www.globalpolicy.org/empire/analysis/2003/0807bigrogue.htm>

carbon dioxide, considered the principle cause of global warming, is not among them.<sup>4</sup> In the bill, President Bush encourages voluntary self-regulation of CO2 emissions by industry, stating that he believes global warming is a very serious issue, but that the country's energy shortages and economy are more important.<sup>5</sup>

As the world's single largest producer of carbon dioxide, emitting about 20 tons of airborne carbon per person per year, the US's refusal to regulate carbon dioxide emissions is a tremendous blow to the international effort to curb global warming. It is also a very dangerous decision, as global warming threatens all peoples and nations of the world. A rise in temperatures would negatively impact human health, given the subsequent increase in warm weather diseases and the decline of air quality, which would exacerbate allergic disorders. Agriculture, forests, and ecosystems of all kinds would also be threatened by increasing temperatures and changes in the water cycle.<sup>6</sup> Further, scientists believe that global warming may lead to the melting of polar ice caps, causing the world's oceans to rise anywhere from 6 to 37 inches over the next century. Coastal populations and island nations would be adversely affected by such rises, and coastal ecosystems would be endangered.

This paper seeks to defend the logic of multilateralism as it applies to global environmental politics. I will argue that because of the truly global scope of pollution and the shared nature of natural resources, all nations and all peoples need to cooperate to conserve the world's resources, prevent the further contamination of our air, land, and waterways, and to find innovative new methods for promoting sustainable development. "Multilateralism is no longer a choice. It is a matter of necessity, and of fact."<sup>7</sup> The continued refusal of nations – particularly the United States – to recognize that fact, will mean the further degradation of our global resources, potentially beyond the point from which future multilateral efforts will be able to restore them.

In Part One I will explore the definition of multilateralism, considering the evolution of its use and its discrepant meanings. I will also examine the relationship between "multilateralism" and "collective action" and consider their viability as synonyms. Part two will be divided into three sections. In the first I will discuss the general risks and benefits of multilateralism as they apply to developing states. In the second section, I will discuss the risks and benefits of multilateralism as they apply to developed states, and in the third section I will discuss their specific application

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, the reductions called for in the "Clear Skies" legislation are more lenient than those that the administration inherited from President Clinton. Jalonick, Mary Clare. "Prospects Dim for 'Clear Skies' as Industry Joins List of Foes." *CQ Weekly*, vol. 61, issue 23, 1281-5.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, Owen. "The Kyoto Protocol." *CBC News Online*. March 2001. [http://www.cbc.ca/news/indepth/background/kyoto\\_protocol.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/indepth/background/kyoto_protocol.html) visited 8/5/03.

<sup>6</sup> Horsch, Richard A. and Joseph D. Richards. "Does Kyoto Protocol Fall Short of the Mark?" *New York Law Journal*, April 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Forman, Shepard. "Multilateralism as a Matter of Fact: U.S. Leadership and the Management of the International Public Sector." *Multilateralism and US Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*. Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman, eds. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, 439.

to the United States. I will explore these applications both generally and also in specific terms of global environmental issues. I will finally conclude that in the face of all of these considerations, multilateral cooperation is the only logical approach by which imminent global environmental issues can be addressed.

## **MULTILATERALISM DEFINED**

The first documented use of the term “multilateral” to describe an international arrangement dates back to 1858. The noun form of the word – “multilateralism” – on the other hand, only came into use in 1928, in the aftermath of the First World War. James Caporaso observes that the noun “comes in the form of an ‘ism,’ suggesting a belief or ideology rather than a straightforward state of affairs.”<sup>8</sup> A definition put forth in US foreign policy in 1945 supports this observation. Multilateralism was then defined as “international governance of the ‘many,’” and its central principle was “opposition [of] bilateral and discriminatory arrangements that were believed to enhance the leverage of the powerful over the weak and to increase international conflict.”<sup>9</sup>

Although much has changed since the end of the Second World War, the most basic definition of multilateralism has not. In 1990, Robert Keohane defined multilateralism as “the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states.”<sup>10</sup> In a 1992 article, John Ruggie agreed that this was an accurate definition of multilateralism, but called it “nominal” and criticized it for being incomplete. Ruggie observed that “what is distinctive about multilateralism is not merely that it coordinates national policies in groups of three or more states, which is something that other organizational forms also do, but that it does so on the basis of certain principles of ordering relations among those states.” He thus formulated a substantive definition of multilateralism, which states that “multilateralism refers to coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles,” which James Caporaso, publishing at the same time as Ruggie, more succinctly articulates.<sup>11</sup> As Caporaso explains,

“As an organizing principle, the institution of multilateralism is distinguished from other forms by three properties: indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity. Indivisibility can be thought of as the scope (both geographic and functional) over which costs and benefits are spread...Generalized principles of conduct usually come in the form of norms exhorting general if not universal modes of relating to other states, rather than differentiating relations case-by-case on the basis of individual preferences,

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<sup>8</sup> Caporaso, James. “International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations.” *International Organization*, 46, 3 (Summer 1992), 600-601.

<sup>9</sup> Kahler, Miles. “Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers.” *International Organization*, 46, 3 (Summer 1992), 681.

<sup>10</sup> Keohane, Robert O. “Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research.” *International Journal*, 45 (Autumn 1990), 731.

<sup>11</sup> Ruggie, John. “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution.” *International Organization*, 46, 3 (Summer 1992), 566-68.

situational exigencies, or a prior particularistic grounds. Diffuse reciprocity adjusts the utilitarian lenses for the long view, emphasizing that actors expect to benefit in the long run and over many issues, rather than every time on every issue.”<sup>12</sup>

This inclusion of “principles” in the definitions offered by the US government in 1945, and by Ruggie and Caporaso more than fifty years later, suggests that the beliefs required for multilateral cooperation are as central to its function as are its more formal tenets.

Caporaso’s definition also illustrates the aspect of multilateralism with which the current Bush administration currently struggles – the concept of “diffuse reciprocity.” If multilateral environmental cooperation is to be successful, its different actors need to understand that they are working toward a greater future benefit that will require certain sacrifices to be made, to different extents, by different actors. Developed and developing nations will have different roles to play in cooperative efforts, given their different needs and capabilities, and based upon these differences, the benefits of cooperation will seem more immediate to some actors than to others. For all, however, the ultimate goal is the preservation and protection of our shared resources, and it is a goal that can only be achieved if the principle of diffuse reciprocity is recognized and developed countries like the United States agree to make changes or even sacrifices for their own, albeit not immediate, benefit.

## **RISKS AND BENEFITS OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION**

Critics of multilateralism warn that it interferes with market operation, is characterized by bureaucratic enforcement, and fails to accommodate the different preferences and capabilities of differently developed countries. There are also many that confuse global governance with global government, and who thus worry that multilateral action will usurp the sovereign power of states.<sup>13</sup> All of these concerns, however, are either unfounded or avoidable. I will discuss the risks and benefits of multilateralism as they pertain respectively to developing states, to developed states, and finally to the United States.

### **Developing States**

Multilateralism poses a risk to developing countries insofar as multilateral agreements call upon them to implement regulatory measures beyond their reasonable capacity to do so. Developing countries do not have the financial and technological resource base readily available to industrialized nations. Consequently, internationally determined policy changes are often both more difficult for developing countries to comply with, and less of a priority for them to

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<sup>12</sup> Caporaso, James. “International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations.” *International Organization*, 46, 3 (Summer, 1992), 600-601.

implement than more fundamental policies, for example, to reduce poverty and improve access to basic services. The requirements of multilateral agreements can also hinder further development in developing countries, by demanding the reduction or termination of activities that would facilitate more rapid economic development. This is particularly true with regard to environmental issues. Natural resources are the foundation of many developing economies. To put international restrictions on resource use has the potential not only to hinder economic development, but even to threaten the livelihoods and basic rights of many people. The same is true of land use regulation, as the creation of new protected areas can cut locals off from water, fuel, and other resources essential to their survival. By entering into multilateral agreements, developing countries thus run the risk of signing themselves into a regulatory corner that, while protecting “global” resources, will reduce their potential for future economic development and their citizens’ ability to meet their basic needs.

On the other hand, however, multilateralism is the most egalitarian form of international cooperation and decision-making, and multilateral institutions are among the very few forums in which developing countries can potentially have an equal voice. Because developing countries greatly outnumber developed countries in a one-country-one-vote framework, such nations are given the opportunity (at least in theory) to exert an influence as great, if not greater, than their developed counterparts. Multilateralism in general, and multilateral institutions in particular, thus provide a more democratic means of determining which global issues should be addressed and how states should address them.<sup>14</sup> Critics are correct in noting that multilateralism threatens to, and often does, leave developing countries underrepresented at the bargaining table. But this misses the point, for even under-representation is significantly preferable to the complete lack of representation that developing countries would enjoy under international arrangements that were not even egalitarian in theory.

The more democratic processes generally involved in arriving at multilateral arrangements can be used by developing countries to avoid the aforementioned risks. Rather than establishing regulatory levels or criteria that are applied equally to countries at all levels of development, agreements can be negotiated in such a way as to maximize long-term benefits for all parties involved. In exchange for concessions on resource regulation, for example, developed countries can provide less developed countries with aid, in one form or another. Aid in the form of technology transfer has the potential to be doubly beneficial, as the introduction and implementation of cleaner, more efficient technologies will not only encourage economic growth but greener industrial practices as well. Through such exchanges, the North can potentially accelerate the development of the South while simultaneously acting to secure resources for its future generations.

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<sup>13</sup> McGinnis, John O. “The Political Economy of Global Multilateralism.” *Chicago Journal of International Law*, Fall 2000, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, 785; Kahler, 681; Forman, 439.

## Developed States

Although developed states are better poised, after a century and a half of development, to begin clean up, even those that have recognized the need to do so have found it difficult because the market does not generally encourage such action. This is the case because pollution is an externality, the costs of which are not internalized by the polluting state. While it is likely that only one nation benefits from dumping pollutants into the ocean, for example, the cost is borne by all nations that otherwise benefit from that ocean being pollution-free. The same can be said for carbon dioxide emissions that travel across borders, along with a host of other forms of pollution. As a result, nations are over-incentivized to pollute, and therefore worldwide pollution exceeds the socially optimal level. Incomplete consumer knowledge also contributes to the market's failure to accurately reflect the costs of environmentally detrimental activities.

One way to confront these inefficiencies is through government regulation at the national level, which can be mandated by multilateral agreements. Many developed states feel threatened by such agreements, however, as compliance with the regulations they stipulate generally involves some degree of economic loss. Because the market does not reflect the costs of pollution, it also does not reflect the gains yielded by its abatement. Multilateral agreements that seek to regulate activity in this way thus threaten to make industrialized states temporarily less competitive, and have therefore curried disfavor among elites in some developed countries.<sup>15</sup>

That analysis falls short, however, when multilateralism is viewed in a broader context. In fact, multilateralism offers developed nations a solution to the aforementioned problem by arranging for competing states to synchronize their implementation of such regulation. As a result, heavily polluting nations can begin the abatement process with minimal fear regarding the loss of their respective competitive advantages, since those nations most likely to be their competitors – other developed, heavily polluting nations – will be required under a multilateral framework to abate as well. Clearly, the same cannot be said for a nation that decides to abate unilaterally. Multilateral cooperation thus allows developed nations, if they are truly serious about their commitment to an improved environment, to work toward that end in a much more efficient, predictable, and ultimately more cost-effective manner than would a series of disjointed, unilateral decisions to reduce pollution.

But what incentive do developed states have to cooperate with developing states? Developed states, after all, generally wield more power than do less developed nations, making them more inclined to believe that multilateral cooperation is unnecessary and that such agreements serve more to impose restrictions than to provide benefits. From this perspective, it appears that developing nations generally have more to gain through collective action and the forging of

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<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, Kevin C. "Why Multilateralism Matters in Resolving Trade-Environment Disputes." *Widener Law Symposium Journal*. Trade and the Environment: Implications for Global Governance. Spring, 2001.

mutual agreements than do developed nations that are generally able to achieve results independently or by cooperating with a limited number of other developed nations.

As Caporaso reminds us, however, multilateralism is based largely upon the principle of diffuse reciprocity. Nations cooperate because they will benefit in the aggregate, not in every transaction. Developed nations therefore need to accept that on some issues, less developed nations will appear to be given a competitive advantage through multilateral environmental agreements, but that ultimately, all nations will benefit from having a clean atmosphere, potable water, and fish to eat for generations to come. Further, the temporary economic compromises sometimes demanded by environmental agreements can often be offset by gains in other areas. In this global age, every state has some stake in the financial, environmental and military activity of all others. More short-term benefits can thus be achieved for developed states by expanding multilateral agreements across several issues – for example, by exchanging compliance with environmental regulation for technology transfer, as was agreed upon at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, multilateral environmental cooperation, which can appear to require developed nations to compromise their national interests, in fact allows such nations to protect their own future interests, with the added benefit of potential short-run gains along the way.

### **The United States**

Now that I have discussed the risks and benefits that multilateralism poses to developed nations more generally, I would like to take a closer look at the United States, as it is the failure of that state to cooperate that is the impetus for this paper in the first place. I will begin by stating that, despite its own beliefs, the U.S. does not represent a special case in this discussion, but simply a superlative case. The United States, although wealthier and more militarily powerful than most other nations put together, is still a nation. Therefore, the risks and benefits that apply to developed nations more generally, as discussed above, apply also to the U.S., only in a more exaggerated manner. More interesting in the discussion of the relationship between the United States and multilateralism are the theories of hegemonic behavior within that context.

Two theories dominate the literature explaining the tendency of great powers to act unilaterally, and the way in which such activity should be viewed. The first of these theories (although in terms of chronological emergence of the theories, it is the latter), is hegemonic stability theory, which posits that the international community will benefit from the exercise of hegemonic dominance by a single state, and that it is out of understanding of this benefit that a hegemon chooses to act unilaterally in the first place. The second is the great-power theory, which suggests

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<sup>16</sup> Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 3-14, 1992 (United Nations Publications, sales no. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda).

that it is simply a desire to maximize its freedom to exercise its greater power that makes a hegemon a poor multilateralist.<sup>17</sup>

A literature search yields far more criticism of hegemonic stability theory than support for it. Martin Wight, one of the theory's more vocal opponents, states that "history affords little support for the assertion the great powers like to make that they are more restrained and responsible than minor powers. It suggests, rather, that they wish to monopolize the right to create international conflict."<sup>18</sup> Drawing from history, he further observes that,

The League of Nations brought what might be called the formal enfranchisement of the minor powers. [It gave them] a regular means of making their voice heard in the Assembly, where all were represented equally. And here by a paradox it was seen that the powers who by definition were without 'general interests' were more capable than the great powers of pursuing consistently what might be regarded as the universal interest of upholding international law and order.<sup>19</sup>

Examples from recent history further support Wight's analysis. From the United States' refusal to recognize the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) when held in violation of international law for "unlawful use of force" in Nicaragua (1986), to its failure to ratify the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) – from its complete abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol (2001), to its renunciation of the International Criminal Court Treaty (2002) – the United States has demonstrated time and again that it is not willing to compromise its sovereign rights or to be held accountable to international standards of conduct.<sup>20</sup> And the United States appears to fully believe that it will never be held accountable for its non-cooperation. It is evident from this, that Great Power Theory much more accurately describes the tendencies of recent US action with regard to international cooperation than does Hegemonic Stability Theory.

The problem with this Great Power attitude is twofold, inflicted not only upon the world, but also upon the U.S. itself. As Stewart Patrick notes,

For all its overwhelming power, the United States cannot by itself stem the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, preserve regional stability, enforce international law and human rights standards, maintain an open and nondiscriminatory trading system, ensure the stability and liquidity of global financial markets, protect the "global commons," stop global warming, stem transnational trafficking in narcotics, thwart organized crime syndicates, slow global population growth, regulate immigration flows, respond to

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<sup>17</sup> Holloway, Steven. "U.S. Unilateralism at the UN: Why Great Powers Do Not Make Great Unilateralism."

<sup>18</sup> Wight, Martin. "Great Powers." *Power Politics*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978, 42-43.

<sup>19</sup> Wight, Martin. "Great Powers." *Power Politics*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978, 66.

<sup>20</sup> DuBoff, Richard. "Mirror Mirror on the Wall, Who's the Biggest Rogue of All?" <http://www.globalpolicy.org/empire/analysis/2003/0807bigrogue.htm> (accessed 8/14/03).

humanitarian catastrophes, stem pandemics, or promote sustainable development.<sup>21</sup>

Relative to the scale of these global problems, the power of the United States is quite limited. It is in the best interest of all international actors, including (and perhaps especially) the United States, for the hegemon to begin to cooperate with the rest of the international community and to act more responsibly than it has of late.

US inaction and non-cooperation also impacts the collective efforts of the international community to an extent proportionate to its superlative stature. Collective action assumes that free-riding or non-compliance by one actor in a group will not greatly affect the outcome of the group, but that the subsequent tendency for multiple actors to defect threatens to undermine the group's efficacy and ruin the outcome for all actors. In the case of the global commons, however, not all actors share equally. Because of this, defecting or free-riding by different nations will affect the community differently. As the world's most significant per capita consumer and polluter, non-compliance by the United States will have a tremendous impact on the group, even if no other actors defect. For all of these reasons, then, the US has both a great incentive and a great responsibility to cooperate with the other nations of the world to arrive at multilateral agreements, both environmental and otherwise, in order to protect our common future and US national interests.

## CONCLUSION

In defending multilateralism, I do not mean to suggest that it is a simple system for international cooperation. There is no simple system when so many actors are involved and the issues and stakes are so great. Among the many complex options, I agree with Ruggie's assertion that multilateralism is one of the most demanding, as it requires states to resist the temptation of immediate national interest gratification.<sup>22</sup>

[However], the very features that make it strategically difficult to establish multilateral arrangements in the first place may enhance their durability and adaptability once in place. An arrangement based on generalized organizing principles should be more elastic than one based on particularistic interests and situational exigencies. It should, therefore, also exhibit greater continuity in the face of changing circumstances, including international power shifts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Forman, Shepard. "Multilateralism as a Matter of Fact: U.S. Leadership and the Management of the International Public Sector." *Multilateralism & U.S. Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*. Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman, eds. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, 439. Forman here quotes from Patrick, "America's Retreat from Multilateral Engagement," 439.

<sup>22</sup> Caporaso, James. "International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations." *International Organization*, 46, 3 (Summer, 1992), 604.

<sup>23</sup> Ruggie, John. "Anatomy of an Institution." *Multilateralism Matters: Theory and Praxis of an Institution*. John Ruggie, ed. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, 32-33.

What I hope to have demonstrated in this paper is that multilateralism offers both a short-term utilitarian value insofar as it provides developing states with a greater voice in international matters, enables developed states to synchronize implementation of new environmental and economic policies, and facilitates mutually beneficial trade-offs between developed and developing states. More important than these short-term benefits, however, is the promise of multilateralism to provide the most tempered, egalitarian, and sustainable future. As Forman succinctly states, “in this age of accelerated globalization, multilateralism offers the most effective means to realize common goals and contain common threats.”<sup>24</sup>

The issues raised by critics can all be answered. Questions of bureaucracy and global government can be resolved through thoughtful design and careful monitoring of multilateral organizations. The introduction of centralized bodies to international negotiations is not intended to challenge the sovereign power of states, but rather to achieve through cooperation those things that no state can achieve on its own. Multilateral institutions do not need to interfere with market operation, but can rather introduce mechanisms that make that operation better reflect the costs involved and thus make it more efficient.

The transboundary nature of current global environmental issues makes them the concern, whether recognized or not, of every single nation on the planet. The contribution of the United States to the creation of such issues is too great for any group of nations to successfully address without US cooperation. We are at a critical point in our dealings with these problems, as, with the implementation of cleaner technology and adjustments in levels and types of consumption, we could likely repair much of the damage already inflicted and prevent much future damage. However, as long as these issues are not effectively addressed, the quality of the air we breathe will continue to deteriorate, fisheries will become depleted, once rich fields will lie barren and salinated, and old growth forests will disappear. Multilateralism not only represents the most efficient, most effective, and most egalitarian approach to addressing global environmental issues, it is quite simply the only approach that brings with it the authority, legitimacy, and resources required to tackle so vast and complex a problem.

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<sup>24</sup> Forman, Shepard. “Multilateralism as a Matter of Fact: U.S. Leadership and the Management of the International Public Sector.” *Multilateralism & U.S. Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*. Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman, eds. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, 440.