

American Hegemony and the Global Environment

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What about the critics who say the Bush Administration—at best—lacks an environmental policy? Or—at worst—is engaged in an assault on the environment? It's clear that we have failed in the court of public opinion to tell our story.

(John F. Turner, US Assistant Secretary for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, March 2, 2004)

For many environmentalists in Europe and elsewhere, the United States has emerged as the new “rogue state” in global green politics. Ever since the United States took a backseat at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, US foreign policy has appeared to be lukewarm about, and often hostile to, multilateral environmental policymaking. From the rejection of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to the withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the United States has shown itself to be concerned more with national economic interests than global environmental threats. Many observers see this as a fundamental shift away from the US environmental leadership of the 1970s and 1980s. In the early days of global environmentalism, the United States pioneered modern environmental legislation and promoted the creation of global regimes ranging from ozone layer protection to the preservation of threatened species. More recently, however, the US government has repeatedly challenged the need for new environmental treaties; questioned the scientific basis of international regulation; and rejected the notion that precautionary action is warranted in the face of potential ecological dangers. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, the United States frequently branded European countries as environmental laggards, it is the European Union (EU) that now claims the mantle of international leadership in sustainable development.

This reversal in international environmental roles coincides with a fundamental shift in international relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War have precipitated a profound change in the underlying structure of the international system. The United States has emerged from this tectonic shift as the predominant power in a unipolar international environment. With no other state to challenge its preponderance in the military field, talk of the return of hegemony, and even empire, has gripped the imagination of scholars (Ikenberry 2001; Wade 2003). Curiously, the renaissance of the study of hegemony has left no discernible mark on the field of international environmental studies. This fact is somewhat surprising, given the widespread perception of a shift in US foreign environmental policy since the early 1990s. To be sure, hegemony has never fared well as a concept in the study of international environmental policymaking. But the strengthening of America's hegemonic position in the post-Cold War era and its more overtly unilateralist stance should give rise to more systematic reflection on the links between the international distribution of power and the pursuit of global environmental objectives. This essay provides some initial thoughts on the relevance of

“hegemony” to the study of international environmental politics and US environmental diplomacy.

Indeed, the essay takes as its starting point the widespread perception of America’s foreign environmental policy as increasingly unilateralist and obstructionist. Although there is considerable *prima facie* evidence to support this view, it would be misleading simply to equate the rise of US hegemony with a kind of global antienvironmentalism. Hegemony is central to understanding US foreign policy; this applies to foreign environmental policy as well. However, the link between the position of the United States in the international structure and its environmental diplomacy is more complex than systemic theory would suggest. Three points in particular are worth noting:

First, America’s apparent disengagement from multilateral environmental policymaking must be seen in a wider historical context. An exclusive focus on post-Cold War transformations in the international system is at danger of overstating the recent shift toward unilateralism. A historically informed perspective would emphasize both the use of unilateral measures in the past and the continued relevance of multilateralism today. Even though there is greater willingness in Washington “to go it alone,” unilateralism has always been part and parcel of US environmental diplomacy. Ever since the first UN environmental conference in 1972, the United States has pursued a multitrack approach, which has included multilateral environmental policymaking as well as the use of unilateral threats and sanctions. The more recent revival of US hegemony will merely strengthen this *à la carte* approach to environmental policy instruments.

Second, there is no simple and straightforward correlation between America’s hegemonic position and the type of environmental diplomacy it is likely to pursue. The fact of hegemony as such does not determine whether the United States will promote or oppose the creation of international environmental governance. To some extent, a link can be established between US predominance in the international political economy and the rise of global environmentalism since the late 1960s, analogous to the way in which it promoted global economic cooperation after 1945. But unlike trade and monetary policy, environmental policy has never been central to the US effort to create international order. At times, the US government has used its economic strength and political influence to promote global environmental objectives. On other occasions, it has acted as a veto power, blocking progress toward multilateral policymaking. This suggests that we have no convincing structural theory that can explain the direction and evolution of US foreign environmental policy.

Third, we, therefore, need to look at the domestic sources of US foreign environmental policy. Given the absence of a global strategic imperative in US environmental diplomacy, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the United States pursues global environmental issues largely in response to domestic imperatives. Indeed, closer analysis of the foreign policymaking process supports the view that domestic factors play a key role in determining environmental diplomacy, arguably more so than in many other foreign policy arenas. As will be discussed below, the fluctuation and diversity in US foreign environmental policy to a large extent reflect the interplay among domestic interest groups and the fragmented nature of America’s political system. Much of US foreign environmental policy can be understood as an attempt to internationalize domestic environmental policy objectives or to protect domestic economic interests against international regulatory threats, depending on the prevailing balance of domestic interests. America’s strengthened position as a global hegemon is, thus, likely to reinforce the domestic imperative in foreign environmental policy. It is important to note, however, that the domestic imperative can work in both ways: against as well as in favor of multilateral environmental solutions.

The essay proceeds in three parts. The first part examines the concept of hegemony within the study of international environmental politics, highlighting its

potential uses and shortcomings. The second part seeks to shed light on the apparent contradictions in US foreign environmental policy. It argues that in explaining US involvement in the global environmental agenda, hegemony provides an important, albeit incomplete, perspective and needs to be supplemented with other, nonstructural dimensions. The third part seeks to explain the variation in the conduct of US foreign environmental policy with reference to domestic factors. Against the backdrop of this explanation, the concluding part provides an interpretation of US foreign environmental policy and multilateralism's problematic place within it.

Hegemony and the Study of International Environmental Politics

Political-structural approaches¹ to hegemony have played only a marginal role in the burgeoning literature on international environmental politics. This is in stark contrast to the study of international economic relations, in which scholars have invoked the concept of hegemony in explaining the emergence and endurance of international cooperation and regimes. Serious concerns exist with regard to the explanatory power of the concept of hegemony (Lake 1993; Walter 1993), but for many it remains a useful starting point for analysis. In environmental studies, however, hegemony has not featured prominently; indeed, most of those scholars who have considered its explanatory power have rejected it.

The appeal of the structural approach to theories of international bargaining and cooperation rests on its status as a highly parsimonious form of reasoning. Linking specific outcomes in international negotiations to the distribution of power between the players involved often provides an intuitively convincing first-cut explanation. In this perspective, powerful states tend to be rule makers and less powerful states tend to be rule takers. International institutions, such as the Bretton Woods regime, broadly reflect the interests of the leading powers that dominated international society at the time of their creation. Structural theory predicts that, by and large, great powers and particularly hegemons determine the course of international regime building (Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger 1997: chap. 4).

Scholars of international environmental politics have objected to this line of thinking for two reasons. At an empirical level, several cases can be cited in which environmental regimes have been created and developed irrespective of, and even against, the interests of the great powers and especially the hegemon. Oran Young (1994:117) has pointed to the bargaining regarding the deep seabed provision of the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea, in which the United States was unable to prevail over other countries, and the 1990 London Amendments to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, which included provisions that the United States did not want to see as part of the Protocol. One can add to this the case of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change, which was adopted despite severe US reservations and entered into force in February 2005. More recently, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was adopted in 2000 and entered into force in 2003; this protocol was achieved despite US obstinacy (Falkner 2000). These cases suggest that it has been possible at least to reach agreement on international environmental issues without full US support or even against active US opposition. Of course, whether international regimes created against the interests of hegemons stand a chance of being effective cannot be taken for granted. But it is widely accepted that the experience with international environmental policymaking in the twentieth century does not support the claim that hegemony is a necessary condition for regime formation.

¹This essay focuses on political-structural theory that takes the distribution of power in the international states-system as the central structural variable (for example, Krasner 1976) as compared to the economic-structural theory that merges dominant state power with capitalist structures (for example, Cox 1987) in its perspective on global hegemony.

At a conceptual level, structural accounts emphasizing the role of hegemony have been criticized for providing only a partial explanation of international cooperation at best or for ignoring the issue-specific characteristics of international environmental politics. Young (1994) has argued that the question of transferability or substitutability of different forms of power limits the applicability of hegemonic theory in the field of environmental protection. The United States may be the unrivaled military superpower at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but “there is little reason to believe that military power has much relevance in the negotiations of . . . environmental regimes” (Young 1994:136). In a similar vein, Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh Brown (1996:15) state:

Global environmental politics do not give rise to a hegemonic power in the traditional sense of a state with the ability to use military power to coerce other states into accepting the hegemon's position. There is no positive correlation between dominant military power and leadership on global environmental issues—and there may be a negative correlation between the two in that high levels of military spending divert financial resources from environmental issues.

Given the empirical anomalies and conceptual limitations of hegemonic theory, it is not surprising to find most environmental scholars looking for other, nonstructural accounts of environmental regime building. In his review of recent scholarship on global environmental politics, Ronald Mitchell (1998) accords only marginal value to hegemony in explaining regime formation. While acknowledging that regimes can be imposed by hegemonic states or that weaker states may perceive certain regimes as imposed, Mitchell (2003:505) asserts that “structural power provides less explanatory leverage than realists might have us believe.” Michael Zürn (1998:625), in his review of recent scholarship on international environmental politics, likewise dismisses the notion that hegemonic power plays a major explanatory role. In accounting for the rise of international environmental regimes and governance, the majority of environmental scholars have used neoliberal institutionalist, cognitivist, or transnationalist arguments (Haas 1990; Haas, Keohane, and Levy 1993; Wapner 1996). When structural arguments enter the analysis, they usually do so with regard to the distribution of interests and issue-specific power resources in a given policy field, but less so with regard to the basic structure of the international system and its conditioning effect on interstate relations.

If hegemony is conceived narrowly in terms of military preponderance, the concept will be of very limited use in the study of international environmental politics. Considering the economic foundations of hegemony, however, brings into sharper focus the close nexus between international economic interdependence and the global ecology. Because hegemony invariably occupies a prominent place within the global economy, their foreign policy is bound to be of critical importance to the prospects of creating effective environmental regimes. Depending on the nature of the environmental issue, economic power can be a determining factor regarding that hegemon's bargaining position (Young 1994:134–138). For example, economic predominance is a critical asset when a hegemon can use trade sanctions in an asymmetrical fashion, that is, without facing retaliatory action by target nations. In a similar fashion, economically dominant countries may be able to resist pressure to go along with international efforts to protect the environment and can be thought of as potential “veto powers” that are able to block progress in international negotiations. In environmental issue areas in which the cooperation of a hegemon, or a group of economically influential countries, is essential to the success of a regime, these countries will be in an exceptionally strong bargaining position (Porter and Brown 1996:14). Hegemony, thus, remains a relevant concept for the study of international environmental politics, if not to explain the creation of regimes, at least to help us understand the obstacles to effective international action.

American Hegemony and International Environmental Politics: Between Leadership and Veto Power

For hegemonic theory to provide a useful guide to understanding a hegemon's foreign policy, it needs to be supported by an account of its domestic sources. As critics of hegemonic stability theory have pointed out, an exclusively systemic approach cannot explain the particular policy choices that a hegemon makes (Lake 1993:477). This criticism applies to the nature of trade and monetary policy as much as to environmental policy. It is, therefore, necessary to clarify the domestic structures and dynamics that sustain a specific approach taken by a hegemon when dealing with global environmental problems.

Throughout the history of international environmental politics, the United States has played an active role in the creation and design of international regimes and has used its power to pursue its preferred policy objectives. To be sure, US hegemony has not translated into international policy outcomes in a straightforward manner. Nor has US foreign environmental policy been consistent over time in terms of its overall direction. Depending on the environmental issue that is the focus of attention and its broader international context, America's hegemony has formed the basis for both international leadership and veto power in environmental regime formation. There is, thus, no simple correlation between the US position in the international system and its environmental objectives. As will be argued below, the influence of competing domestic interest groups and the fragmented nature of the foreign policy system in the United States are largely responsible for the considerable variation in US foreign environmental policy over time and across issue areas.

Hegemony as Environmental Leadership

The first use of hegemony in international environmental politics revolves around the use of superior power in the interest of international regime building. Young (1989:88) has argued in *International Cooperation: Building Regimes for Natural Resources and the Environment* that, even though hegemonic states rarely impose international regimes against the wishes of other states, they play an important role in providing leadership in the creation of mutually agreeable environmental regimes. Although environmental leadership does not necessarily result from hegemonic power, it is closely linked to such power. Environmental leadership can take many different forms: policy entrepreneurship of individual actors in international bargaining that facilitates compromise and agreement in the interest of environmental causes (entrepreneurial leadership); diffusion and role model effects of national environmental policy (intellectual leadership); and the more explicit use of economic incentives and sanctions in pursuit of international environmental objectives (structural leadership) (Young 1991; Lake 1993; Vogel 1997; Tews 2004).

Even though hegemony is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the existence of environmental leadership, it is usually only powerful states that have a lasting effect on international negotiations and norm creation. Weaker states may assume a leading position when it comes to developing progressive environmental policies or demanding stringent international rules. But such initiatives will remain ineffective if they are not backed up by political and economic clout that can foster international agreement and induce compliance. For example, smaller European states such as Denmark and the Netherlands have often been in the vanguard of environmental policy innovation, but Germany, Europe's largest economy, is usually credited with providing the essential leadership for advancing environmental policies at the EU level. A similar picture emerges in the international system. It is mainly states that have dominant economic and political clout and whose position in the international economy affords them the possibility of exerting indirect or direct

pressure on other states that can provide effective leadership on environmental issues.

The United States is a good example of this conclusion. For much of the early phase of international environmental politics, the United States provided international leadership in one form or the other. It was one of the first leading industrialized nations to develop comprehensive environmental legislation and regulatory institutions. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which was set up in 1970 to integrate the widely scattered programs and institutions dealing with environmental matters, instantly became a model for similar regulatory agencies that were created in other industrialized countries during the 1970s. Much of this state activity was underpinned by the world's most dynamic environmental movement, which came into existence in the mid-1960s. US environmental groups ranging from the more traditional bodies (Sierra Club, National Audubon Society) to modern environmental nongovernmental organizations (Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, Greenpeace) worked to create broadly based domestic support for a more ambitious environmental policy at home and abroad. US scientists and activists came to play a leading role in the global environmental movement that began to emerge in the 1970s (Kraft 2004).

At the international level, the United States began to claim the mantle of environmental leader, first at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 (Hopgood 1998:96), and later in the context of the multilateral efforts to agree on environmental treaties. Having declared eight whale species endangered based on the Endangered Species Act of 1969, the United States took up the issue of whale preservation internationally and initiated a transformation of the international whaling regime to emphasize species protection rather than natural resource usage. US diplomatic pressure and threat of sanctions were instrumental in getting the International Whaling Commission to place a ban on commercial whaling in 1984 (Porter and Brown 1996:77–81; Fletcher 2001).

Also in the 1970s, the United States began to support international efforts to take action against ozone layer depletion and in the 1980s became a key advocate of international restrictions on the use of ozone-depleting chemicals. During the negotiations on the Montreal Protocol, the US government provided important leadership and exerted pressure on skeptical states, especially the European producers of ozone-depleting substances, that objected to strong international measures (Benedick 1991). Whereas the ozone negotiations provided the United States with an opportunity to display leadership in a multilateral context, US policy on the conservation of species took on a more unilateral character. More than any other country, the United States has used the threat of sanctions to change other nations' behavior in areas that endanger threatened species. Using import restrictions on products made in an environmentally damaging way, the US government forced foreign fishing fleets to comply with American standards of protection of, for example, dolphins and sea turtles (DeSombre 2001).

In these cases and others, the United States benefitted from its superior position as the world's largest economy and import market for internationally traded goods. The nodal position that the US economy occupies in international economic flows affords it a unique opportunity to use economic pressure in the pursuit of environmental objectives. This is not to say that other nations are devoid of similar economic power; depending on the nature of the environmental issue, economic power can be more dispersed than concentrated in the international economy. In biodiversity protection, for example, none of the industrialized countries appear to have such decisive economic clout that it can force support of the global biodiversity regime; all they can do is provide financial side payments. Furthermore, the European Union has emerged as a potential contender to US environmental leadership not the least because it has assumed a coequal position in key areas of international policymaking, such as in international trade (Smith 2004). But the fact

remains that on many environmental issues, the United States has unrivaled opportunities for exercising leadership. That it has not always acted on these opportunities does not alter the reality of America's superior power.

Hegemony as Environmental Veto Power

Hegemony can provide the basis for environmental leadership, but it can also easily degenerate into a source of veto power. Just as economically dominant states can use their power in the interest of environmental action, so they can seek to block progress on international efforts to manage environmental problems. The United States has acted as both a leader and a veto power over the last 30 years in the environmental arena, and has shifted toward the latter more decisively in recent years. Veto power in environmental affairs rests on the ability of a state, or a group of states, to withhold essential cooperation in the management of environmental problems (Porter and Brown 1996:14). Environmental veto power does not solely rest with hegemonies. For example, Brazil, Malaysia, and other countries with tropical forests were able to resist pressure to agree on a binding forestry regime at the 1992 UNCED, mainly because the world's largest rainforests are within their national jurisdiction. But a hegemon such as the United States possesses an environmental veto power in a more comprehensive manner, spanning across a wide range of environmental issue areas, because of its pivotal role as the world's leading economy.

A few economic indicators may serve to illustrate this point. For example, the United States is the world's largest contributor to man-made climate change. It emitted 23.4 percent of global CO₂ emissions in 2002 (US Department of Energy 2004). The US share of global energy consumption is in the region of one-quarter. The average per capita consumption of energy in the United States is five times the global average, with per capita carbon dioxide emissions in the United States being double that of most other industrialized nations and nearly 20 times that of India's per capita emissions (Starke 2004:26). The US share of global forest products consumption is 18.5 percent (FAO 1996 data), and the US share of worldwide materials consumption is 28.7 percent (US Geological Survey 1995 data). These are merely snapshots of a larger picture that emerges when one considers the share of US production of environmental "bads" and consumption of environmental "goods." They indicate the scale of American entanglement with an environmentally damaging economic system that spans the world. The United States, thus, has the potential to dramatically influence the effectiveness of international regimes in their promotion of environmental protection. Its contribution to international action will be crucial to overall success; its failure to participate in joint efforts is likely to prevent other states from acting on their own. In this sense, American economic hegemony is of direct concern to the field of global environmental governance.

Turning now to the historical record, we can find several instances in which the United States has acted as a veto power or has failed to cooperate with other nations in the search for solutions to global environmental problems. To be sure, US refusal to join multilateral environmental agreements did not always prevent such agreements from entering into force. Indeed, one of the more remarkable facets of international environmental policymaking is the emergence of regimes in the absence of hegemonic leadership or cooperation. But when the United States has refused to support international agreements, as in the case of the Kyoto Protocol, their effectiveness is severely constrained. In the long run, US participation is essential to providing effective solutions to global environmental problems.

The collapse of US environmental leadership in recent times has broadly coincided with the end of the Cold War. Although the Reagan administration had already started to reign in the ever-expanding scope of environmental regulation, the impact of the Republicans' deregulatory agenda manifested itself in foreign

policy only under the presidency of the first George Bush. US opposition to key agreements at UNCED in 1992 signaled a new confrontational approach that was to characterize US policy throughout the 1990s. When the Clinton administration took office in January 1993, many expected the new White House to resume a leading role in international environmental politics. Vice President Al Gore's long-standing commitment to progressive environmental policy, as expressed in his best-selling book *Earth in the Balance*, was reflected in the Clinton–Gore election campaign manifesto:

The world faces a crisis because of global climate change, ozone depletion, and unsustainable population growth. These developments threaten our fundamental interests—and we must fight them at a global level. America must lead the world, not follow (quoted in Paarlberg 1997:135).

The new administration made encouraging steps toward restoring US environmental credibility, including the establishment of a White House Office of Environmental Policy and the appointment of Carol Browner as the new head of the EPA. But on important multilateral environmental issues, the Clinton administration failed to make any significant progress. Despite its declared intention to adopt the CBD and its support for the Kyoto Protocol, the White House failed to win sufficient support in Congress for the ratification of both these multilateral environmental agreements.

Unlike Clinton, George W. Bush entered office in January 2001 without any promise to restore US environmental leadership. Instead, Bush reversed several domestic environmental policy decisions taken by the outgoing administration and placed economic interests at the heart of its new foreign policy. Even though Clinton had supported the Kyoto Protocol, he deliberately failed to submit it to Congress for ratification, knowing that it would be defeated. Bush subsequently decided to renounce the treaty in 2001, provoking widespread condemnation among other signatories. The rejection of the Kyoto Protocol was but the most spectacular of a number of withdrawals from multilateral environmental policymaking. In the field of regulating genetically modified organisms (GMOs), for example, the US delegation led the opposition by a small group of GMO-exporting countries against trade-related measures in the 2000 Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (Falkner 2000; Bail, Falkner, and Marquard 2002).

Transatlantic environmental relations reached a new low in 2003 when the United States brought a formal WTO challenge against the European Union's regulatory framework for GMOs (Brack, Falkner, and Goll 2003). To be sure, the United States' more critical view of the global environmental agenda is not the result of a fundamental policy shift under the current Bush administration. It reflects a long-standing skepticism among Congressmen, and especially Republicans, about the merits of an undifferentiated commitment to multilateralism. In the words of Robert Kagan (2003:78), "American Cold War multilateralism was more instrumental than idealistic in its motives." This instrumental approach was only reinforced by the end of the Cold War and resulted in a more compartmentalized foreign environmental policy. Despite repeated efforts by the Clinton administration to link the security agenda with economic and environmental concerns (Allenby 2001), environmental issues were never fully incorporated into the United States' strategic outlook. In effect, domestic factors played a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign environmental policy.

Explaining US Foreign Environmental Policy: The Domestic Factor

When accounting for the US influence on environmental politics in the twentieth century, most analysts agree that the United States was a leader in the late 1960s

and 1970s but has turned into a laggard more recently (Paarlberg 1999; Dryzek et al. 2003:17). This section of the essay will examine the factors that have shaped US foreign policy on the environment and will help explain the changes in recent history. Even though American hegemony and the wider international context undoubtedly play an important role in determining US foreign policy, hegemonic theory itself is a poor guide to understanding the shifts that have occurred in its foreign environmental policy. Unlike in finance and trade policy, for which scholars of international political economy have posited a close link between hegemonic leadership and the creation of an open and liberal international economic order (Lake 1993), parallel arguments about what kind of foreign environmental policies hegemons are likely to pursue have not been advanced (Barkdull and Harris 2002:70). It is in the realm of state–society relations, domestic interest groups, and bureaucratic politics that we have to look for an explanation of the shifts in US environmental diplomacy.

A Divided Political System

As the experience with US policy on biodiversity and climate change suggests, US presidential leadership abroad is easily trumped by Congressional opposition at home. The split between the executive and legislative branches of government became all too apparent in the 1990s. Because the Clinton administration lacked Congressional support for its international environmental ambitions, it had to backtrack from its support of the CBD and the Kyoto Protocol, and it was unable to live up to its earlier promises to take the country back into the multilateral policymaking arena. These two examples suggest that a critical condition for environmental leadership is, therefore, the building of domestic coalitions in support of an active foreign policy (Paarlberg 1997:137). Although the success of domestic coalition building will be influenced by the political landscape of the day, there are structural reasons to suggest that stable and broad-based coalitions are likely to be the exception rather than the norm, and that domestic fragmentation will remain a pervasive aspect of foreign environmental policy in the United States.

One important reason for this fragmentation lies in the nature of the American political system. With its decentralized decision-making process and power separation between the executive, legislative, and judiciary, US environmental politics proceeds in an often erratic fashion and can lead to considerable deadlock between competing institutional interests (Kraft 2004:chap. 3). Presidential leadership can easily be blocked through concerted efforts on Capital Hill, where lobbyists are likely to find a receptive audience, especially in the runup to Congressional elections. And although the executive has greater room for initiative in foreign policy, the need for Congressional approval of international agreements and domestic programs acts as a dampener on international leadership efforts that are not backed by a broader coalition of interests at home.

Congress's powerful position in US foreign environmental policy is based on its constitutional role in the policymaking process in three particularly sensitive areas: its authority to ratify international treaties; its budgetary and fiscal powers that affect proposals for environmental taxation, international environmental aid, and other environmental spending programs; and its general legislative role in establishing and reviewing environmental regulations. All three of these areas are critical to foreign environmental policy. They affect the ability of the United States to accede to agreements it has negotiated and signed; they determine the extent to which US environmental leadership is backed up by promises of international environmental aid; and they influence the ability of the United States to provide a model for policy innovation through effective domestic regulation.

Decentralization and the separation of powers in the American political system make it more difficult for the government to sustain support for international

environmental institutions. The example of global biodiversity policy shows how limited the powers of the White House can be when faced with determined opposition in Congress. Despite achieving major concessions at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, the United States refused to sign the CBD, mainly over concerns for intellectual property protection and in response to intense industry lobbying. The Clinton administration sought to reverse the image of the United States as a global environmental laggard and negotiated with leading biotechnology firms a solution that would allow the country to sign the Convention. This was to be done through an interpretation to be submitted with the US signature, which would prevent the convention from infringing on patent rights or commercial opportunities for research and innovation. In the end, however, it was Congress that refused to ratify the Convention, despite a broad consensus between industry, environmental groups, and the White House. Until today, Republican opposition to this particular Convention has prevented full participation by the United States in this area of international environmental regulation (Falkner 2001:169–171).

Pluralist Interest Group Politics

One of the defining characteristics of US foreign environmental policy is the degree to which it is driven by domestic concerns. More than in many other fields of foreign policy, domestic actors play a highly visible and influential role in shaping American engagement with the international environmental agenda. William Clark and Nancy Dickson (2001:260) go so far as to describe the US encounter with global environmental risks as “an inherently *social* phenomenon” (emphasis in the original). Because of the openness of the foreign policymaking process and the active involvement of domestic interest groups in the environmental field, the US role in global environmental politics would be incomprehensible if nonstate actors were not taken into account.

From the early days of modern environmentalism, scientists, civil society groups, and corporations have been actively seeking to shape the creation and implementation of international environmental regimes. The influence of nonstate actors can be detected in all three phases of international regime building: agenda setting, negotiation, and implementation. Apart from creating and influencing public opinion on environmental risks, domestic interest groups have directed their lobbying efforts at key actors within the executive and legislative branches of government. This is not to say that state actors do not retain a certain degree of autonomy in pursuing foreign environmental objectives. Interest group politics do not dominate the formation of national negotiation positions, which often reflect the particular interests of individuals, or bureaucratic units, operating within the governmental apparatus. But in the environmental field, these state actors reach decisions within a highly politicized context that requires Congressional approval for major international initiatives and agreements. They are, thus, exposed to the diversity of interests that make up the fluid field of interest group politics in the United States.

The high degree of nonstate actor involvement in foreign environmental policy can be observed in other states as well. But the American political system provides a particularly fertile ground for interest group lobbying and poses more severe constraints on the autonomy of state actors in the pursuit of international environmental goals. The separation of powers between the executive and the legislature provides multiple entry points for interest groups, and interdepartmental competition within the executive branch of government elevates interest groups to important allies in the bureaucratic politics of foreign policymaking. This is all the more so because foreign environmental policy involves a wide range of departmental interests. In most cases, the inner core of executive decision making involves the White House, the State Department, and the EPA. Depending on the environ-

mental issue, it may also include the Departments of Commerce, Energy, Agriculture, Health, and the Treasury as well.

The relative influence of different interest groups varies across time and between issue areas, which is one important reason for the fluctuations in the pursuit of US environmental diplomacy. Two important rifts within the domestic constituency of US foreign environmental policy can be observed: that between environmental organizations and business groups, and that between competing interests within the business sector. Environmental groups and business interests frequently pull in opposite directions when it comes to managing environmental problems, but under certain circumstances they can work together to support international regulation. Furthermore, the business community is not always united in its stance on environmental issues. Potential conflict between different corporate interests over the desirability and nature of international regulation is an important influence on the US position in international environmental negotiations (Falkner 2001).

Much international environmental regulation appears on the international agenda through the process of internationalizing domestic regulation (Schreurs and Economy 1997; DeSombre 2000). Just as any other country with advanced environmental regulation, the United States has regularly sought to export its domestic regulatory standards. This has been done not only with a view to raising the global level of environmental protection but also to creating a level-playing field for its industry. As Elizabeth DeSombre (2000) has shown, US efforts to internationalize domestic regulations are most likely to occur when domestic coalitions exist between environmental and business interests that would benefit from the international harmonization of standards. Environmental groups wish to ensure that global environmental problems are addressed at the highest level, while certain industry groups support international regulation to reduce, or avert, the threat of competitive disadvantage *vis-à-vis* foreign competitors. This was the case in the extraterritorial application of US standards to dolphin and sea turtle protection in tuna and shrimp fisheries (DeSombre 2001), the pressure on European states to adopt America's partial phaseout of the use of ozone-depleting substances (Kauffman 1997), and US efforts to introduce an international ban on commercial whaling following the passage of America's Endangered Species Act in the late 1960s (Porter and Brown 1996:78).

The United States may not have always succeeded in getting other states to agree to its preferred environmental standards, but more than any other country, it has used economic sanctions as a tool for internationalizing its domestic policy preferences. Given that the use of economic pressure results in costs and may have negative international repercussions, US governments have used this route only when strong domestic pressure has compelled them to do so. In this sense, then, the use of America's dominant position in the international political economy is directly linked to domestic forces and coalitions of interest groups. The variation in the pursuit of environmental leadership is in part a direct reflection of the constantly shifting domestic ground on which America's "green hegemony" has been built.

American Hegemony and the Future of Multilateral Environmentalism

Since the end of the Cold War and especially in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, it has become commonplace to argue that the world of international relations is undergoing a period of rapid and profound change. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the communist bloc, the rise of new security threats including fundamentalist terrorism, and the acceleration of economic and social globalization have all added to the growing sense that established structures and patterns of international relations have become more fluid. Although it is easy to overstate the change that is occurring in large political and

social systems, the last few years have justifiably reawakened a sense of historical transformation that much international relations scholarship lacked during the Cold War years. This sense of international change is less pronounced in the field of international environmental politics than in other policy areas. Some recent trends, however, suggest that the re-emergence of a unipolar international system is likely to have a lasting impact on the politics of global environmental protection. The United States has more readily than ever before challenged the foundations of multilateral environmental policymaking and has withheld support for international environmental regimes on several occasions. Within the transatlantic relationship—already severely strained by disagreements over the use of force and the role of international law—the debate on climate change and GMOs has further tested US–EU relations. In a reversal of previous roles, the European Union has even begun to portray itself as the new international leader while branding the United States a laggard.

America's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 was but the most controversial example of this renewed unilateralist instinct that is said to have gripped US foreign policy. Washington's opposition to Europe's precautionary ban on GMOs and its reluctance to agree to any specific targets at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development further deepened international suspicion of an anti-environmental turn in US foreign policy. But the reality is less clear-cut than some European observers would admit. The revival of American hegemony has not led to a straightforward decline in America's commitment to multilateral environmental policymaking. The exercise of green leadership and veto power have always been closely connected with the United States' dominant position in the international political economy. Moreover, the United States has pursued multilateral and unilateral strategies in its foreign environmental policy ever since the rise of modern environmentalism. What has changed since the end of the Cold War is the degree to which the United States can afford to choose international environmental commitments to which it is willing to agree. US environmental diplomacy has thus oscillated between global environmental commitment and unilateral abstention for some time, including in more recent years. That the current Bush administration has shown greater willingness to prioritize national economic interests over environmental concerns is widely acknowledged—even by the administration itself. But on some environmental issues on which domestic interests and governmental objectives coalesce, the United States has continued actively to engage with the global environmental agenda. To cite only a few recent examples, the United States signed the Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent in 1998 and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants in May 2001. In November 2003, the United States hosted the signing of the revised Inter-American Tropical Tuna Convention, the treaty designed to protect migratory fish. The United States also continues to support environmental efforts in developing countries financially, for example, through the Congo Basin Forest Partnership and debt-for-nature-swaps in tropical countries.

If there is one important impact that the strengthening of America's hegemonic position has had, it is the role that multilateral policymaking plays in US environmental diplomacy. More so than for any other industrialized country, the United States is willing and able to view environmental multilateralism as a tool rather than as a guiding principle. The United States has consistently stressed that the emergence of a global environmental agenda should not be confused with the transformation of national interests into some diffuse concept of the planetary interest. Despite pressures from domestic environmental groups to transcend the narrow pursuit of *realpolitik*, successive US governments have identified and managed global environmental problems as discrete issues and within their national interests (Hopgood 1998:235). The United States is, of course, not alone in seeking to protect its sovereignty when engaging with a global agenda. But because of its

unrivaled supremacy in the international political economy, the country is in a better position than any other state to ensure that the “pull effect” of multilateral policymaking does not unduly erode its national autonomy. Unlike Europe’s industrialized countries that have come to consider the need to participate in multilateral environmental institution building as a “good citizenship” norm in international society, the United States has no qualms about remaining outside the multilateral fold whenever it sees that important national interests are threatened.² Multilateralism is, as a result, less of an intrinsic foreign policy objective for the United States than for other nations, not because it is hostile to multilateralism, but because it has greater ability to pursue both multilateral and unilateral options.

This is not to say that there are no strong voices speaking in favor of multilateral environmental policy within America’s foreign policy elite. In their condemnation of US obstructionism in climate change policy, Europeans are in danger of overstating the US shift toward unilateralism. Officials within the core institutions of US foreign environmental policy will continue to advocate supporting international environmental regimes and the principle of multilateralism. In what Stephen Hopgood (1998) describes as a central cleavage within the US state, “advocates” and “skeptics” will continue to struggle over the direction that US environmental diplomacy should take in the future. Much of this intrastate wrangling will involve domestic interest groups that support one of these two sides. Given the close connection between international environmental regulation and domestic interests and the lack of an overall strategic interest in environmental protection, American policy will probably follow closely the shifting patterns of interest coalitions that emerge in the state–society nexus.

For this reason, then, it is possible to detect a certain degree of continuity in US foreign environmental policy. Whether the United States pursues aggressive environmental objectives or seeks to block regime creation at the international level, it will do so in response to domestic imperatives and in reflection of the underlying interest coalitions driving environmental diplomacy. More so than in other public policy arenas, the domestic imperative reigns supreme in US foreign environmental policy. Whether the United States will revert to recent trends toward environmental unilateralism and obstructionism depends primarily on the emerging balance between competing domestic interest groups and their interaction with Congressional and governmental actors. The reassertion of American hegemonic power since the end of the Cold War will not in itself prevent a more active US engagement with the global environmental agenda. But renewed US environmental leadership is only possible as a result of strong public demand, supported by institutionalized pressure from environmental groups and business interests acting in favor of international regulation. There is no structural reason why this different vision of US environmental diplomacy cannot become a reality. As Mick Cox (2003:532) said in a recent response to Robert Kagan’s diagnosis of the new reality in US foreign policy, “the struggle for the foreign policy soul of America will go on.”

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²As an example, consider the Biodiversity Convention where the United States is part of a small group of countries that are nonparticipants including Iraq, Timor, and the Holy See.

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