

The devastating diplomatic defeat sustained by the United States in the U.N. General Assembly vote on China raises serious questions about the conduct of American foreign policy not only in recent days but in recent years.

The agonizing reappraisal required can be evaded, of course, by diverting attention to scapegoats. Ambassador George Bush loyally blamed himself rather than President Nixon and pointed the finger particularly at several small countries that reportedly defected before the vote despite prior indications of support. And a move is under way in the Congress to penalize the United Nations as a whole by cutting the American financial contribution, a move surprisingly abetted by President Nixon and Secretary Rogers.

But the question that needs to be faced is not why the United States lost the support of Qatar, Oman, Cyprus, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia and Ireland—seven countries with a total population of twelve million. The real question is why the United States had frantically to woo or pressure these and other small states in the first place.

The sad answer is that the mini-states became crucial to the United States because most of this country's important allies had already parted company with Washington on the China issue. The United States lost the critical "important question" ballot, on which the whole outcome turned, by only four votes, 59 to 55. Ten of the country's 13 NATO allies in the U.N.—seven more than last year—voted against the United States on this ballot or abstained. Only three NATO countries voted with the United States: Greece, Portugal and Luxembourg.

Why did Britain, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey and Iceland switch their votes this year? Domestic politics played a role in some countries; trade in others; all were exasperated by the long delay before the United States finally came out for a two-China policy. Even a year or two earlier, the American proposal to seat both Chinese governments in the General Assembly and Peking in the Security Council would have passed with ease.

Starting with the Kennedy Administration, the United States increasingly kept its own counsel in world affairs outside Europe. Unilateral action without adequate consultation with the nation's closest allies—and sometimes without even informing them in advance—became more frequent in the Johnson Administration and, under President Nixon, has become the normal pattern.

The concept of common policies, jointly determined, has given way progressively to a go-it-alone approach. Even Britain's Prime Minister Edward Heath finally felt constrained earlier this month to protest Mr. Nixon's search for "direct arrangements" with the Soviet Union and Communist China. Since Aug. 15, when Mr. Nixon's unilateral economic decisions threw the world into a monetary and trade crisis, Washington's emphasis on "American interests first," instead of the common interests of the free world alliance, has brought a strong "Gaullist" echo back from Western Europe, Canada and Japan.

Japan finally was bludgeoned into supporting the American position in the U.N. But of the ten member nations of the enlarged European Common Market that is coming into being with Britain's entry, only Luxembourg voted with the United States on the China issue.

The U.N. vote showed that Mr. Nixon cannot have it both ways. He cannot expect the full support of the country's allies if he goes it alone in negotiations with Communist China and the Soviet Union and replaces the free world economic cooperation of the past quarter century with rivalry and America-first self-interestedness. There must either be a return to the alliance cooperation of the past both with West Europe and Japan or a progressive disintegration of the free world fabric.

The danger we face is not that of isolationism or neo-isolationism in the United States, but that of an American nationalism that ultimately will isolate the United States in the world.