

THE SECOND IRAQ WAR: HOW AMERICAN DOMESTIC POLITICS UNDERMINED THE UNITED NATIONS

M A T T H E W G A R O F A L O

ABSTRACT

This paper uses an Idealist approach to international relations to evaluate why the United Nations failed to prevent the Iraq War in 2003. Idealism, which posits that it is possible to create a peaceful world, has been a dominant paradigm in the International Relations (IR) field of studies since the end of the First World War. However, despite the construction of international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) designed to achieve this goal, global society has continued to be plagued with wars throughout most of the 20th and 21st centuries. A textual analysis of various articles, newspapers, interviews, and public opinion polls demonstrates that factors outside the UN's control inhibited its ability to facilitate peace in the Middle East in the early 2000s. This paper highlights how United States (U.S.) domestic politics, specifically the public opinion of Americans, corporate lobbyists' activities, and the Bush administration's policy of U.S. hegemony, collectively undermined collaboration in the international system. These findings show that bodies such as the UN are vulnerable to external forces, which in the case study of the Second Iraq War (2003-2011) rendered it incapable of resolving this conflict.

Keywords: United Nations, Idealism, Hegemony, State Actors, International, Domestic.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that institutions such as the UN are ill-equipped to stabilize the international system and facilitate a world of peace. Using the idealist approach, it evaluates how U.S. domestic politics, such as the Bush administration's policy of U.S. hegemony, the public opinion of Americans, and non-state actors including lobbyists, undermined the UN's ability to prevent the U.S. and its allies from

invading Iraq in 2003. The article first analyzes the George W. Bush administration's principle of American exceptionalism, which led the U.S. to advocate for a 'performative' war in Iraq and produced an uncooperative international environment. Second, it shows how domestic politics in the U.S. influenced foreign policy in the Middle East, since U.S. public opinion favored intervention. Third, it considers the role of non-state actors, such as lobbyists, and highlights their ability to impact international affairs. Finally, this paper concludes by highlighting the reasons underlying the UN's failure to resolve this conflict from an idealist perspective. Based upon the research presented, it is clear that idealism's own core assumptions undermined the UN, the very institution it sought to uphold.

IDEALISM EXPLAINED

Idealism is a theory in IR that is often associated with the notion that it is possible to create a world of peace (Owens, Baylis, and Smith, 2016). After the First World War, in order to solve the problem of how to arrange relations between states peacefully and prevent future wars, prominent figures such as the U.S. American President Woodrow Wilson helped establish international institutions to regulate global anarchy, such as the League of Nations (Noor et al., 2022). The hope was that the integration and cooperation of states and peoples would create over time a shared global sense of identity and belonging. However, the demise of the League of Nations less than two decades after its creation and ensuing conflicts in both the 20th and 21st centuries demonstrate that these institutions and their successors, such as the UN, established in 1945 at the end of the Second World War, failed to facilitate lasting peace in the international arena. One such conflict was the Second Iraq War, lasting from 2003 to 2011. On March 20, 2003, the United States of America invaded Iraq, with President Bush justifying

this preemptive strike against a sovereign nation by claiming that Saddam Hussein, the president of the country, was implicated in the 9/11 attacks against the United States (Altheide and Grimes, 2005).

AMERICAN HEGEMONY AND UNILATERAL ACTION

An idealist approach to international relations posits that the state of nature is one of human cooperation (Steigerwald, 1994). For international organizations like the UN to be effective, it is crucial that members act as a collective and cooperate with one another. However, after the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. threatened to take an interventionist approach to protect its national interests. In September of 2002, President Bush took the world stage at the UN General Assembly to try and convince the UN's member states to join the U.S. in its mission to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power, but also stated that the U.S. would act unilaterally if necessary (Chen, 2002). Moreover, administration officials reinforced the idea that as President of the United States, George W. Bush had to act on behalf of the interests of his country (Chen et al., 2002). Rhetoric such as this showed the unwillingness of the U.S. to cooperate with external entities who did not align with its national interests.

The UN Security Council, whose main responsibility is to maintain international peace and security, is heavily influenced by major nations, the most powerful of which, in military and economic terms, is the U.S.. The Council is made up of five permanent members, including the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China, and ten non-permanent members (Curtis et al., 2016). Any decisions made by the Security Council must be passed by a majority of 9 of the 15 members, including each of the five permanent members (Curtis et al., 2016). All five permanent members have the authority to veto UN sanctions and peacekeeping operations (Curtis et al., 2016). Since the U.S. has veto power, action by the Security Council to condemn the legitimacy of the Iraq war was improbable even if the issue were to

have been raised. After all, American officials made their intention to invade Iraq clear on many occasions. This paper argues that the UN, because of its Security Council, where Great Powers have a veto—a very realist concept—is not an entirely liberal internationalist organization capable of restraining its members from using military force.

The use of force against Iraq was controversial both politically and legally (Hmoud, 2004). Key U.S. allies and members of the UN Security Council, including permanent members France, Russia, China, and non-permanent member Germany strongly objected to military operations in Iraq and believed that an American invasion was unjustified (Hmoud, 2004). Despite this, it became abundantly clear that the U.S. saw itself as an 'unrivaled hegemon' who could use its veto power to manage the Security Council or to oppose the UN body all together (Mingst, 2003). The 'Bush Doctrine', which refers to American foreign policy principles, famously promoted the idea of American exceptionalism and was unequivocally committed to maintaining U.S. sovereignty when it came to world politics. American exceptionalism refers to the notion that the U.S. is a unique power in international politics and must remain militarily superior to all other states (Mingst, 2003). This attitude is reinforced by the country's large economy and remarkable military power. In the case of the Second Iraq War, the United States contended that it had a 'right' to initiate military operations and, because of its veto power, essentially ignored suggestions made by members of the Security Council to find a peaceful alternative to invading Iraq (Mingst, 2003). As a result of this realist mechanism of veto powers allocated to the permanent members of its Security Council, the UN found itself unable to prevent this conflict despite its liberal internationalist founding principles and mission.

Aside from challenging U.S. authority, the terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda also exposed America's vulnerability internationally (Butt, 2019). Therefore, the Bush administration argued that it had an obligation to reassert U.S. hegemony by

demonstrating strength on an international scale (Butt, 2019). The decision to engage in a 'performative war' against Iraq was thought to "instill fear into potential enemies and ensure that nations submit to American authority and global order" (Butt 2019: 250). After all, peaceful bargains such as those facilitated by the UN, do not achieve the same effect (Butt, 2019). Therefore, it was not in the U.S. interest to cooperate with the UN since the Bush administration's ultimate goal was not to achieve peace but to ensure that American hegemony prevailed. The idealist notions that human nature is one of cooperation (Steigerwald, 1994) and that international institutions can create peace and stability (Steigerwald, 1994) were not ubiquitous in the American political sphere in the immediate wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Since the Bush administration felt that US public opinion was strongly behind it, it believed that it could take the political risk of defying the UN and going ahead with the invasion despite lacking a UN resolution authorizing it (Foyle, 2004). As a result, it did so with only a 'Coalition of the Willing', including primarily the United Kingdom led by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who strongly supported President Bush's decision to intervene in order to ensure that Saddam Hussein would not develop and use WMDs (Sharp, 2003, p. 62). Consequently, the UN was unable to prevent the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent war in the Middle East.

DOMESTIC POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY

An idealist approach to international relations believes, contrary to classical realism, that there is no clear division between 'high' and 'low' politics (Noor et al., 2022). This idealist notion potentially undermined the UN's ability to prevent the war in Iraq since U.S. foreign policy was strongly influenced by its domestic politics (Foyle, 2004). After 9/11, as the Bush administration moved the United States towards war with Iraq, public opinion was a central aspect of its deliberations (Foyle, 2004). After all, the terrorist attacks led the public to favor such a war

and influenced Congress to support the White House in its efforts to eliminate domestic threats (Foyle, 2004). According to a Gallup / CNN / USA Today poll produced on September 22, 2001, 84% of U.S. respondents saw the 'destroying of terrorist operations outside of Afghanistan' as very important (Foyle, 2004). Furthermore, 68% of respondents believed that Saddam Hussein should be removed from power (Foyle, 2004). Alternative polls also showed that the American public was increasingly willing to accept U.S. casualties in the fight to eliminate terrorism (Foyle, 2004).

President Bush feared public reaction if he did not act now and Saddam Hussein would be later implicated in another attack against the United States (Foyle, 2004). He specifically stated, "I don't want history to look back and say, "Where was President Bush?" (Foyle 2004: 273). It is important to consider that President Bush was a democratically elected official with future electoral ambitions. To explain, when 9/11 occurred, he was in his first term of his Presidency and he had to consider policies that would benefit his re-election campaign. He was determined to avoid becoming a one-term President, like his father, George H.W. Bush (1989-1993). Therefore, it is possible that President Bush's inclination for personal success and considerations for his re-election in 2004 had a direct impact on the UN's ability to negotiate a peaceful solution to the crisis, since U.S. foreign policy was based upon voters' wishes. This demonstrates how domestic politics has the potential to influence international politics and undermine imperfect liberal internationalist institutions such as the UN

The United Nations' ability to prevent the U.S. and its allies from invading Iraq was also undermined by false testimonies, state-generated propaganda, and media outlets (Foyle, 2004). The Bush administration's most fully articulated case for war was presented in Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003 (Zarefsky, 2007). In his address, Secretary Powell presented what eventually turned

out to be false evidence that suggested Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Zarefsky, 2007). Even though this information was later deemed inaccurate, it dramatically changed at the time it was persuasively presented by Colin Powell the opinions of American citizens regarding whether military action against Iraq was warranted (Zarefsky, 2007). According to a public opinion poll after the speech, 62% of respondents said that Saddam Hussein posed “an immediate danger to the world” (Zarefsky, 2007: 295). Furthermore, 63% of respondents favored an American invasion of Iraq with ground troops, up 5% from the period before the speech (Zarefsky, 2007). Corporate media outlets, including ABC, CBS, and NBC aided the Bush administration's “march to war” by failing to air a wide range of debates from diverse perspectives (Hayes and Guardino, 2010: 59).

In evaluating the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, evidence suggests that the line between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics was increasingly blurred. Since domestic politics in the United States dramatically influenced American foreign policy in the early 2000's, the UN was unable to facilitate the emergence of a global consciousness that valued peace, thereby inhibiting its ability to prevent war. A critical argument explaining the outbreak of the Second Iraq War is therefore rooted in idealist principles of international relations that directly contradict a classical realist approach denying any possible spill-over between domestic politics and global power relations.

MULTIPLE ACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

An idealist approach to international relations believes that there are a multiplicity of actors in international politics (Noor et al., 2022). These include state actors themselves as well as alternative entities such as religious institutions, multinational corporations, and lobbyists (Owens, Baylis and Smith, 2016). Various tactics were used by ‘outside’ actors to influence the Bush administration's decision to pursue military action in Iraq. These

included ‘infiltrating’ the White House with individuals connected to defense and oil companies as well as billions spent by these on lobbying the federal government. Considering this, it is evident that the United Nations’ ability to influence a peaceful negotiation between the U.S. and Iraq was undermined by numerous U.S.-based special interest groups, whose influence on the foreign policies of states is acknowledged by idealism but ignored by classical realism.

Lobbying activities of economic non-state actors have an important influence on the prospects for war (Hartung and Ciarrocca, 2003). The military-industrial complex (arms lobby) has a tremendous influence in Washington D.C. over policy and legislation regarding war (Hartung and Ciarrocca, 2003). This became abundantly clear during the buildup to the Iraq conflict in 2003. Not only did industry-backed think-tanks spend billions of dollars lobbying the U.S. federal government, but defense contractors also conveniently found former executives, consultants, or shareholders holding positions in President Bush’s National Security team. In 2003, Lockheed Martin, the U.S.’ largest defense contractor, had multiple direct or indirect ties to policy makers within the White House. Very prominent figures included Lynne Cheney, wife of Vice-President Dick Cheney, who served on Lockheed’s board of directors from 1994 until her husband's inauguration in 2001 (Hartung and Ciarrocca, 2003). During this period, she accumulated more than \$500,000 in directors' fees (Hartung and Ciarrocca, 2003). Similarly, Northrop Group, which is the U.S.’ third largest defense contractor, had direct links to Air Force Secretary James Roche, who was a former company vice president. Additional companies, including General Dynamics, Raytheon, and Boeing were also said to have direct ties to officials within the Bush administration. For example, Senior Advisor to the President Karl Rove, who actively advocated for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, owned between \$100,000 and \$250,000 in Boeing stock according to disclosure forms at the time (Ibid.).

In an interview conducted by NPR, journalist Steve

Coll outlined the influence that oil giants, specifically ExxonMobil, had in the Bush Administration (NPR, 2012). Coll described ExxonMobil as “one of the most powerful businesses ever produced by American capitalism” and went so far as to say that they are an “extension of the American government” (NPR, 2012). During the Bush administration, the CEO of this oil giant had close ties to Vice-President Dick Cheney (NPR, 2012).

The relationship between multinational corporations and the Bush administration undermined the UN’s effort to facilitate peace. Since powerful individuals inside the White House are ‘bought’ and influenced by companies that tend to profit from war, it is unlikely that they will pursue diplomatic resolutions to resolve conflict. Therefore, it can be argued that the UN was unable to prevent the invasion of Iraq since it was ill-equipped to deal with non-state actors beyond the state, further proving the idealist principle that domestic politics has great influence over a country’s foreign policy.

THE UNITED NATIONS’ FAILURE TO RESOLVE THE IRAQ CONFLICT

In December 2011, President Barack Obama successfully completed the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq; after nearly 10 years of combat, the war was finally coming to an end (Compton, 2015). However, the UN did not have a significant role in the final departure of U.S. troops; rather, U.S. domestic politics continued to influence international affairs. Towards the end of the Bush presidency, the Iraq war had become extremely unpopular among voters (Gartner and Segura, 2008). Americans saw increasing casualties as evidence of a failing foreign policy and were becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the Bush administration lied about the existence of WMDs in the region (Gartner and Segura, 2008). As a result, Republicans lost badly in the 2006 midterm elections and exit polls found that 57% of all voters disapproved of the war in Iraq (Gartner and Segura, 2008). During the 2008 Presidential Election, then-

candidate Barack Obama, leader of the Democratic party, made it a firm campaign promise to end the war (Compton, 2015). In what was seen as a retribution against George W. Bush’s administration, voters elected Democrats to the White House for the first time in eight years in an electoral landslide. Since the withdrawal of American troops in Iraq was reliant on the outcome of domestic elections in the United States, the idealist notion that there is no clear division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics stands true again (Noor et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This paper uses an idealist approach to international relations to analyze why an institution such as the United Nations was ill-equipped to stabilize the international system, facilitate a world of peace and avoid war in the first decade of the 21st century. It begins by evaluating how American hegemony created an uncooperative international environment. It argues that the ‘Bush Doctrine’, which promoted American exceptionalism, influenced the U.S. to act unilaterally in its response to the terrorist attacks that occurred on 9/11, 2001. Next, the paper explains that U.S. domestic politics had a heavy influence on the Bush administration’s foreign policy in the Middle East. It explains that the blurring between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics limited the UN’s ability to promote a global consciousness regarding how peace should be achieved in Iraq. Third, the paper analyzes the role that lobbyists and multinational institutions have in the conduct of national governments’ foreign policies. It argues that the UN is unprepared to deal with actors beyond the state that put their own commercial or individual profit-based interests ahead of their country’s rational national interest. Finally, the paper highlights the UN’s failure to resolve the Iraq conflict by reiterating the importance that domestic politics has on foreign affairs. Despite the fact that idealist efforts after the First World War led to the creation of the League of Nations to regulate global peace, which was succeeded after the end of the Second World War by the UN as the world’s central liberal

internationalist institution, idealism's own core assumptions undermined the very institution it sought to uphold. The arguments presented in this paper outline how the United States political and economic system ensures domestic politics shapes the country's foreign policy. In the final instance, actors such as voting citizens and private corporations had greater influence over the decisions the U.S. made in the Middle East than the United Nations.

The analysis outlined in this paper can also be applied to Russia and the conflict in Ukraine and explains why President Biden has strongly argued in favor of fundamental reform of the UN, who was again widely criticized for being unable to prevent this conflict in the heart of Europe. After all, in February of 2022, shortly after the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, "Russia vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution that would have deplored Moscow's invasion" (Nickols and Pamuk, 2022). Further research is necessary to examine the conditions under which, in accordance with idealist principles of international relations, internal public and non-state pressures on the five veto-holding permanent members of the Security Council could in fact lead to such fundamental reform taking place, thus refuting the classical realist assertion that no such member would ever be willing to renounce its veto powers at the UN.

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