

WEAPONS OF MASS SELF-DESTRUCTION: HOW UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN IRAQ BACKFIRED

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines the perceived failures of the United States in the Iraq War and argues that they were the result of policy objectives that diverged from the principles of realism and instead pursued neoconservative and liberal internationalist ideals. The decision to invade Iraq in 2003 is analyzed through an offensive realist lens, showing how it was motivated by the desire to secure unipolar hegemony through power maximization. It is discussed how post-9/11 and post-Cold War sentiments—alongside suspected weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—influenced the United States actions of self-help in an anarchical international order. The subsequent failures of the United States in Iraq are attributed to attempts to nation build and democratize, which align with liberal internationalism and neoconservatism but are incompatible with a realist approach and are beyond the ability of state power to achieve. The resolution of the conflict under the Obama administration, characterized by a shift to defensive realism through more restrictive and prudent policy regarding US foreign presence, is explained through the recognition that such objectives must be pursued internally by self-interested states and that the national interest of the United States was best served by withdrawing troops from Iraq.

Keywords: Realism, neoconservatism, liberal internationalism, hegemony, democratization, weapons of mass destruction, defensive realism, US foreign policy, Second Iraq War

INTRODUCTION

This piece will argue that the perceived failures of the United States of America in the Second Iraq War (2003-2011) were a consequence of errant policy objectives that strayed beyond the principles of

realism and attempted to achieve neoconservative and liberal internationalist ideals. This will be demonstrated in three steps. The decision of the United States George W. Bush administration to invade Iraq in 2003 will be explained from an offensive realist perspective, justifying the invasion on the basis of the United States acting as a rational, self-interested state seeking to secure its unipolar hegemony through power maximization. The perceived failures of the United States in Iraq will then be addressed through an illustration of how these failures were a product of misguided attempts by the United States government to nation-build and democratise in a foreign state; goals that align with liberal internationalism and neoconservatism and are unequivocally outside the realm of a realist approach. The paper will convey how the United States' initial objective of invasion was successfully achieved, eliminating any rising threat to its hegemony, but the subsequent failures arose as a result of the United States' deviation from the realist approach. Finally, this paper will demonstrate how the Iraq conflict was resolved through the recognition by the Obama administration that objectives of nation-building and democratisation must be pursued internally by self-interested states, and that the most rational course of action for the national interest of the United States was to leave Iraq. President Obama's decision to withdraw troops will be explained as a shift to defensive realism in the United States' approach to international relations.

UNITED STATES INSECURITY

In March 2003, the United States (U.S.) sent military forces to invade Iraq, with the mission to destroy weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) thought to be possessed by Iraqi terrorist groups, and to topple the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein (Laub et al., 2017). Timing was crucial to the decision of the

Bush administration to invade Iraq. In 2003, American sentiments of a near fifty-year period of national tension with the Soviet Union, locked in a bipolar distribution of power, were fresh. The U.S. was determined to maintain its newly-acquired unipolar hegemony, and its decision to invade Iraq reflects this, as Lieberfeld (2005: 2) puts it:

"[The] shift from a two-superpower (bipolar) distribution of power during the Cold war to unipolar U.S. military dominance caused U.S. strategy to shift from policies of deterrence or containment threats to policies of preventative warfare against threatening 'rogue' states."

The Bush administration saw Iraq, which contained Saddam Hussein's regime alongside suspected WMDs, as one of these threatening rogue states posing a threat to U.S. hegemony. Furthermore, in 2003 the experiences of loss and destruction of 9/11 were recent both in the memory of America and the rest of the world. The U.S. aimed to avoid an image of post-9/11 decline by demonstrating its willingness to utilize its immense military-political dominance against any "symbolic or material challenges" (Lieberfeld, 2005: 4).

An Overview of Realist Theories

Realism holds states as the primary actors in world politics and sees international relations as "a struggle for power among states", with each rational state acting to maximize its national interest (Baylis et. al, 2020: 9). Hans Morgenthau (1973: 5) wrote in *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* that the key to understanding international relations is the "concept of interest defined in terms of power". For realists, power determines outcomes, and power is best defined, measured, and exerted through state military force. Structural realism or neorealism, established in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, contends that the anarchical nature of international structure, in which no formal central authority exists, leads to "a logic of self-help" where states must be constantly concerned about the capabilities and intentions of other states, and thus seek to maximize their security (Dunne and Schmidt, 2020: 136-137). John J. Mearsheimer expanded upon

this, introducing a branch of neorealism called offensive realism, which describes a "structure of the anarchic international system that strongly encourages states in their unrelenting pursuit to maximize power with the ultimate goal of becoming a global hegemon" (Lobell, 2017: 4). Neorealism and offensive realism both view the world as anarchic, in which states must act in self-interest to prepare and defend against the unpredictability of other state actions; however neorealism says that states "seek to maximize their security" (Dunne and Schmidt: 137), whereas offensive realism holds that states seek to maximize their power at the expense of other states. According to offensive realism, a state "does not strive to be an equal among its great-power peers but to be the most powerful – the hegemon" (Lobell, 2017: 4). The logic of self-help in an anarchical international order holds that if one state forgoes an opportunity for expansion and power maximization, other states will seize such opportunities, gaining at their expense (Zakaria, 1998). Thus, offensive realism hinges on the assertion that in a world of anarchy, "the best guarantee of survival is to be a hegemon, because no other state can seriously threaten such a mighty power" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 3).

U.S. Offensive Realism in the Second Iraq War

The offensive realist actions taken by the United States in their 2003 invasion of Iraq were a reflection of U.S. attitude towards international relations post cold war. By invading Iraq, the U.S. sought to maximize their power in the world of anarchy. They aimed to eliminate a rising rogue regime thought to possess WMD that could pose a potential terrorist threat to the U.S. and its allies, and demonstrated their expansive and dominant military power to challenge the perceived portrayal of post-9/11 decline (Lieberfeld, 2005). The Iraq War was, in this sense, a preventative war serving to weaken and discourage potential challengers to the U.S. newly unipolar hegemony (Organski, 1968).

WHAT WENT WRONG?: THE EMERGENCE OF ERRANT U.S. POLICY GOALS

On April 9, 2003, the United States forces and its allies defeated the Iraqi army, toppling the central force of Saddam Hussein's regime (Laub et al., 2017). Hussein himself was captured in December and in January of 2004 the search for WMD was aborted, with the Bush administration declaring that its prewar intelligence on WMDs in Hussein's Iraq was inaccurate (Laub et al., 2017). Had U.S. objectives remained aligned with offensive realism, this would have marked the end of the conflict, and American troops would have withdrawn from Iraq. With Saddam Hussein's regime toppled and the concern of Iraqi WMDs established to be baseless, any actual or potential rising threats to the United States hegemony were quelled. By utilizing its powerful military force to subdue potential threats, the U.S. had also discouraged future challengers by dispelling the notion of a post-9/11 decline. Ultimately, by 2004 the U.S. invasion of Iraq had served to maximize power and secure its unipolar hegemony, and thus the U.S. had successfully achieved its national interest in a world of anarchy. However, this is when U.S. foreign policy deviated from the realist approach to international relations. Instead of withdrawing troops from Iraq, the U.S. remained in Iraq, engaging in misguided attempts of nation-building and democratisation. From 2004 to 2010, U.S. forces combated insurgencies and attempted to facilitate democratic elections and economic stability in Iraq. The U.S. failed to achieve its goals of establishing a stable democratic Iraqi government and economy and "effectively abandoned its nation-building efforts after 2009" (Cordesman, 2020). It is this inability to achieve its nation-building goals from which the perceived failures of the U.S. in the Iraq War arise. The misinterpretation of these failures as demonstrating the inability of power to determine outcomes in state interactions has led to the Iraq War being viewed as evidence of realism's inadequacies in explaining international relations. The reality, however, is that the failure of the United

States to achieve its goals was not an issue of power, but policy. U.S. policy objectives shifted from offensive realism driven objectives to maximize power and maintain unipolarity, towards neoconservative and liberal internationalist objectives of democratisation and nation-building.

Liberal internationalism emphasizes "foreign policies designed to enhance multilateral cooperation among states" and asserts that international agencies should engage in peacebuilding within states to facilitate such cooperation (Paris, 1997: 59). Liberal internationalists assume that the key to peace and cooperation among states is "a liberal democratic polity and a market-oriented economy" (Paris, 2017: 55), and advocate for peacebuilding through social engineering that "involves transplanting Western models of social, political, and economic organization into war-shattered states in order to control civil conflict" (Paris, 2017: 55). The nation-building efforts of the United States to equip Iraq with Western systems and institutions was a distinct attempt at socially engineering Iraq to be more compatible and cooperative with liberal democracies. The influence of liberal internationalist goals behind U.S. foreign policy objectives in Iraq are apparent.

Neoconservatism aligns with offensive realism on the notion that America should utilize power through military force in order to protect its hegemony (Lieberfeld, 2005), but deviates on how it views American responsibility in the global order. Realists say that in a world of anarchy, states should be concerned with pursuing purely their own national interest, seeing the international system as a competitive arena where states must provide security only for themselves (Schmidt and Williams, 2008). Neoconservatives, however, believe that the United States has a leadership responsibility within the international system to act as a "benevolent global hegemon that uses its power to promote democracy" (Lieberfeld, 2005: 12). U.S. policy objectives that drove it to remain in Iraq and attempt to promote democracy displayed an embrace of the neoconservative sentiment of global responsibility.

The perceived failures of the United States in Iraq arose from a disjunction between American power and objectives. Even a 2007 surge in U.S. forces that further concentrated U.S. power toward its objectives was ineffective in eliminating the root causes of conflict in Iraq (Sky, 2011), which could ultimately only be solved by Iraqis themselves developing the “necessary institutions to manage competition for power and resources peacefully” (Sky, 2011: 117). Military means were not aligned with policy objectives, and thus increased U.S. power could not overcome the reality that nation-building must be achieved internally by states pursuing their own national interest. The United States’ failures arose from ignorant attempts at using force to prop up a government that could not stand on its own (Muravchik and Walt, 2008). Realism posits that power determines outcomes in international relations, but assumes the desired outcomes of states to be inextricably aligned with their own state interest. The inability of the U.S. to successfully nation-build in Iraq can be attributed to American foreign policy objectives straying beyond the national interest-oriented principles of realism and pursuing neoconservative and liberal internationalist objectives that state power was unequipped to achieve. Thus, the perceived failures of the United States in Iraq demonstrate the effectiveness of realism to explain and predict outcomes in international affairs.

IRAQ WAR RESOLUTION: A SHIFT TO DEFENSIVE REALISM

By 2008, among most Americans, Iraq had become a “distant war”, of which they felt very little sense of ownership or mission (Parasiliti, 2012: 128). Americans had begun to recognize the futility of the war and how their government seemed to pursue goals contrary to the country’s national interest. In November 2008, Barack Obama won the White House campaigning on a promise to withdraw troops from Iraq, and in December 2011 the last U.S. troops left Iraq (Laub et al., 2017). By the time all troops had departed, the United States had spent 800 billion from the U.S. treasury on the war, and

almost 4,500 Americans had been killed (Laub et al., 2017). Realism argues that “rational decision-making leads to the pursuit of the national interest” and that “taking actions that would make your state weak or vulnerable would not be rational” (Antunes and Camisã, 2017: 15). The scale of human loss and wasted expenditure suffered from engaging in a protracted conflict within a nation no longer posing any threat to American national security could not be rationally justified as being in the national interest. Continued conflict in Iraq would only serve to make the U.S. weaker and more vulnerable. The Obama administration recognized that the neoconservative and liberal internationalist goals the U.S. was attempting to achieve by nation-building in Iraq were being pursued contrary to its national interest, and that such nation-building could only be achieved internally, by rational states pursuing their own national interest. In an address, President Obama (2010) declared that “in the end, only Iraqis can resolve their differences and police their streets. Only Iraqis can build a democracy within their borders”. The decision to withdraw troops marked a return to the realist approach in U.S. international relations.

While the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq demonstrated adherence to the power maximizing principles of offensive realism and the vision of an uncontested unipolar world, the Obama administration’s withdrawal from Iraq, paired with a more balanced and pragmatic approach to world affairs moving forward, exhibited a shift towards defensive realism (Cox, 2020). Defensive realism contends that “the anarchical structure of the international system encourages states to maintain moderate and reserved policies to attain security” (Lobell, 2017: 1), and says that it is in the national interest of states to seek to maximize security, not power (Layne, 1997). Defensive realists reject the power-maximization of offensive realists and the liberal internationalist and neoconservative objectives of democratisation and human rights (Juneau, 2020). Defensive realism views force as an inefficient tool for state-building and is skeptical of

externally-imposed social engineering (Juneau, 2020). In leaving Iraq, the U.S. finally ended its misguided and ineffective efforts toward externally-imposed nation-building by means of military force. Defensive realism argues that to maximize security states should “refrain from expansionist or aggressive policies and instead embrace prudence” and “exercise restraint, especially in the face of non-existential threats” (Juneau, 2020: 386).

The Obama administration recognized the excessive use of aggressive U.S. policy in a state posing no existential threat to America, and exhibited prudence by completely repatriating American forces. Obama expressed intent to use increased restraint when engaging in foreign intervention, stating that “trying to play a constructive role from the sidelines rather than getting embroiled directly represents not weakness but prudence” (Juneau, 2020: 387). The costs suffered by the United States in its pursuit of liberal internationalist and neoconservative nation-building goals in Iraq made the state weaker and more vulnerable, thus making a continued military presence in Iraq an irrational course of action for the U.S. in the pursuit of its national interest. The abandonment of such goals indicated a return to realist principles holding states’ interests as supreme in international relations and recognizing that successful nation-building must be pursued and achieved from within. This return to realist principles, alongside expressed intent toward a more restrictive and prudent policy regarding U.S. foreign presence, signified a shift to defensive realism in the United States’ approach to international relations.

CONCLUSION

The actions of the United States in the Iraq War, their justifications, and implications are often central to modern international relations discourse. A misconception has arisen that sees the failures of the United States to achieve its objectives in Iraq, despite far superior military power, as evidence against the realist assertion that power determines outcomes in world affairs. To rebut this notion, this essay first examined the decision of the Bush

administration to invade Iraq from an offensive realist perspective, explaining how American sentiments towards world affairs in a post-9/11 and cold war era led to power maximizing objectives that sought to secure the U.S.’ unipolarity by subduing any rising or potential threats to its hegemony. The perceived failures of the United States in Iraq were then assessed, establishing that the U.S. was successful in achieving its power maximizing objectives of offensive realism, effectively securing its national interest through the use of state power. Perceived failures then arose out of a deviation in U.S. policy objectives from a realist pursuit of its national interest towards liberal internationalist and neoconservative goals of nation-building and democratisation in Iraq. By attempting to use military force to achieve goals outside the principles of realism, the U.S. created a disjunction between state power and political objectives that left power unequipped to bring about the desired outcomes. The Iraq conflict was resolved when the Obama administration abandoned liberal internationalist and neoconservative nation-building objectives and adopted a defensive realist approach to American international relations. This shift to defensive realism was exhibited in the decision to withdraw troops from Iraq, signifying a return to the rational pursuit of the U.S. national interest, and the assumption of more restrictive and prudent foreign intervention policies by the Obama administration.

Looking Forward

The sustained existence of an uncontested United States unipolar hegemony seems unlikely. Rising global powers such as Russia and China seem primed to challenge the United States, and a move towards a more multipolar distribution of global power appears inevitable; indeed, many analysts argue that this change has already occurred. It remains to be seen what grand strategy the United States will adopt to maintain its position of power and leadership in an increasingly multipolar global order (Taliaferro, 2001). A polarized American political climate with a growing divide between nationalistic and globalized attitudes will ensure that acrimonious debates between supporters of the

aggressive, expansionary policy of offensive realism and adepts of the prudent, restrained policy of defensive realism are certain to be at the forefront of United States international relations discourse for years to come.

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