

Pick a contemporary inter-state conflict between a Western state (i.e., the U.K., U.S., Canada) and a non-Western state (excluding China) and critically assess two competing explanations to the question 'why do we fight?'

Essay Development Plan

Intro: Since the turn of the millennium states that can be regarded as ideological challengers to the neoliberal democratic model of the West such as China and Russia have invested significant sums and given significant strategic attention to propagating a positive media image of themselves, both by establishing English language news organisations and by investing in existing Western media outlets.

Main Ethical Challenges: Foreign owned media and the study of it reaches into the heart of a key ethical challenge in the field of international relations in that the Realist school is at ease with the idea of a nation state communicating its ideas with the international public but public opinion itself is an ambiguous concept (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 88) and when there is direct state involvement behind a media platform, the issue is complicated further. It is widely accepted that propaganda is a key way of engaging the public in the democratic process, but generally international relations practitioners are more ill at ease when it comes to propaganda being used to shape public opinion towards a particular end (Gelders and Ihlen, 2010, p. 59). What makes the area even more ethically fraught is that the terms public relations, propaganda are themselves arbitrary and loaded terms, though both focus on the idea of persuasion (L'Etang, 2002, pp. 47-48).

Main Examples of Foreign Ownership: A clear example of this was e-commerce giant Alibaba's recent acquisition of the South China Morning Post, a Hong Kong publication and a beacon for quality journalism in the region (Ohlberg, 2016). Similarly, China Daily has signed a deal with Australia's Fairfax Media to run a lift-out series to go in the Sydney Morning Herald (Clark, 2016). Combined with its own English language versions of China Daily, such as China Daily USA and its

online editorial publication Global Times, there are clear signs that the Chinese government is seeking to improve its image abroad, and it would be the duty of the proposed think tank to explore the ramifications of this.

There is also clearly the scope for the proposed think tank to examine the Russian government's efforts to develop its English language publications. The most notable example of this in recent times was the rebranding of online news service Russia Today, later RT. In 2015, the Russian state increased its investment in the news channel by more than 50%, to around £202 million (Ennis, 2015). Over the last few years RT has advertised heavily in the UK in particular, trying to present itself as an anti-establishment alternative to the mainstream press. According to William J Dobson, the aim of Russia's media campaigning is not simply to mislead or provide a Russian interpretation of news events; rather, it is an effort to create conflicting accounts of events and to shroud the truth of events in enough confusion that no new outlet's version of the event is entirely trusted (Dobson, 2012).

Conclusion: It is important that the "Media Watch" think tank does not itself become an outlet for pro-Western propaganda and an arena for denouncing foreign governments. The aim is not to make moral judgements on other nations, which would also be contrary to the tenets of Realist approaches to international relations and ignore the ethical subtleties of the subject. What is needed much more urgently is an assessment of how foreign media is working.

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Pick a contemporary inter-state conflict between a Western state (i.e., the U.K., U.S., Canada) and a non-Western state (excluding China) and critically assess two competing explanations to the question ‘why do we fight’?

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, culminating with the final withdrawal of American troops in 2011, has had far-reaching consequences for the Middle East, resulting in regime change in Iraq, the outbreak of sectarian violence, regional instability, and arguably, the rise of extremist group Da’esh (Islamic State in Syria and the Levant), which now threatens the future of Iraq’s neighbours, particularly Syria (Fawcett, 2013). The result of the invasion, which was ostensibly aimed at the removal of a hostile regime and its replacement by a more pliant, liberal-democratic government, has severely impaired American interests in the Middle East, dragging the country through a damaging, expensive and prolonged war, and exponentially increasing popular hostility to the United States throughout the region, a factor which has proved to be a powerful recruitment tool for extremist terrorist groups (Isakhan, 2015). The question remains, therefore: why did the United States choose to go to war with Iraq in 2003? The potentially damaging consequences of the war were predicted long before the invasion, and moreover, the legal, moral and pragmatic case made for the war was heavily critiqued as being contrary to U.S. interests (Isakhan, 2015; Owen, 2004). Contemporary IR theory, particularly Neo-Realist and Liberal perspectives, fails to fully account for the decisions taken by the Bush administration to push forward with the war, despite the perceived threat to American interests. This essay will discuss the Neo-Realist explanation for the Iraq war, provide a critique of this approach, and suggest that, in the case of the US

decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Constructivist approaches provide a more accurate, complete and holistic account of the reasons why we choose to go to war.

1. Neo-Realist Theory and the Iraq War

Neo-Realism is a theory of international relations that is primarily concerned with examining the motivations of states that enter into conflict (Waltz, 1959; 1979). Kenneth Waltz, often dubbed as the father of Neo-Realism, begins his significant oeuvre *Man, the State and War* with one central question: why do we fight? His response is articulated in terms of three 'images' of international relations: the individual, the state and the international state system (Waltz, 1959). At the level of the first frame, Waltz attributes war and conflict to the naturally belligerent character of man in the state of nature. War and conflict between states may therefore be the product of the autocratic leadership of aggressive individuals. The second frame focuses on the state, which may display certain characteristics that drive it towards war (Waltz, 1959). Finally, the third frame focuses on the international state system, and the manner in which states will aggressively pursue their own interests and security in an international state system of rational, aggressive states (Waltz, 1979). The international state system replicates the anarchic structure of the state of nature, giving rise to naturally developing power dynamics that regulate this inherent violence.

For Neo-Realists, the present international political climate is one of uni-polarity, where the United States has dominated the international state system since the end of the Cold War (Katzenstein, 1996). This forms the basis for the explanation for the Iraq war, in which systemic factors are mobilised to explain why the United States chose to intervene and topple the regime of Saddam Hussein. For Neo-Realists, the United States, in choosing to invade Iraq, were aggressively pursuing their own interests by removing a potentially dangerous opponent from the international environment (Schmidt and Williams, 2008). Saddam Hussein

was actively opposed to the United States (building on a legacy of conflict between the two states since the First Gulf War), and represented a volatile and unpredictable regime with significant military capacity. The United States wished to prevent the Iraqi regime from developing its weapons supply and potentially developing a nuclear arsenal. Moreover, the invasion was intended to demonstrate to other 'rogue' states that the United States was prepared to intervene militarily to secure its position and security, a fact that had been under question since the emasculation of the United States following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre (Schmidt and Williams, 2008). The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime had been a long-standing policy objective for the United States and was a rational move that was intended to secure its regional interests in the Middle East. The Neo-Realist interpretation of war essentially attributes the causes of the Iraq war of 2003 as a product of the self-interested behaviour of the United States, which not only saw the dismantling of a hostile regime, but also boosted its standing, power and material assets in the region.

2. A Critique of the Neo-Realist Interpretation

The explanatory power of Neo-Realist theory is significantly limited in the case of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and provides a restricted vision of the socially constructed factors that contributed to the conflict. Neo-Realism assumes states to be rational, unitary actors that will always act in their own interests (Chernoff, 2008). However, in invading Iraq, the United States did not act according to rational self-interest, but rather engaged in the conflict due to the socially constructed threat that Middle Eastern 'rogue states' were purported to embody. Since September 2001, the United States had been engaged in the so-called 'War on Terror', a conflict waged against an ideological, nebulous non-state actor (Ingram, 2016). Within this environment, the traditional (Realist and Liberal) frameworks used to analyse state behaviour were inherently limited, because of this shift from a state to a non-state antagonist. Moreover,

despite the fact that the Saddam Hussein's regime had played no part in the attack on the World Trade Centre and his Ba'athist regime was ideologically opposed to the Salafist al-Qaeda, the invasion of Iraq became part of the wider initiative of the War on Terror, under the rubric of attacks on states that 'sheltered terrorists' (Ingram, 2016).

In invading Iraq, the United States acted according to the new principles of the War on Terror, which were not necessarily in accordance with its own security interests. Claims about Saddam Hussein's agenda and capacity to launch an attack on the United States and their regional allies were found, after the invasion, to have been greatly exaggerated in order to provide a justification for the offensive (Kellner, 2015). The Neo-Realist arguments that the U.S. had needed to eliminate a dangerous foe cannot be sustained, and neither can the argument that the Iraq war was a necessary show of strength that would dissuade other would-be attackers. The Iraq war came nearly two years after the 9/11 attacks, was unrelated, and yet was still justified in the same terms that dictated the rationale of self-interest and potential threat in a post-9/11 world (Ingram, 2016). However, the Iraq war proved to be extremely harmful to American interests. It was clear from the outset that the war was going to provoke greater regional unrest and destabilisation, which was heavily exacerbated by the abortive and ill-conceived plan to rebuild Iraq after the invasion (Ingram, 2015). The United States found itself caught up in a prolonged struggle against insurgency within Iraq, and their actions served to harden popular attitudes toward perceived American neo-imperialism and the effort to impose a liberal democratic model through the use of force, providing a fertile terrain for recruitment to terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda.

3. A Social Constructivist Approach to the Iraq War

The impact of social constructivist theory on the international relations field has proved particularly important in analysing state behaviour in a post-9/11 world (Kayser, 2015).

Constructivist theory acknowledges, following Realism, that the structure of the international state system plays an important role in shaping state behaviour, particularly with respect to conflict. However, for Constructivists, greater attention must be paid to the social construction of this system, expressed by social actors who are embedded in culturally defined and constituted practices. The state system does not exist as an objective reality: rather, it must be understood through the intersubjective process by which international norms, practices and meanings are constituted (Hopf, 1998). This provides a new explanatory power for situations in which states appear to act in contradiction with their own self-interests, or in cases where the Realist model of bi-polar stability is proved inaccurate (Carlsnaes, 1992). Meaning is given to concepts such as 'interests' through socially constructed identities. For Constructivists, the concept of identity plays a highly significant role in determining state 'interests', which do not exist as objective reality, but rather are given life through social practice. As such, according to Finnemore (1996), non-state actors may be accommodated in discussions of international relations, as their projected interests and identities (even without comparable material power) may facilitate their participation in the international state system (Gaskarth, 2006). This analysis, moreover, goes beyond the unit level, and describes the way in which these identities and ideational factors shape the character of the international state system itself (Wendt, 1992).

Constructivist theory allows us to go beyond a rational choice model and to analyse the decision on the part of the United States to invade Iraq from the perspectives of interests construed in the light of identity related factors. In the period before the invasion, and even before the attack on the World Trade Centre, the prevailing discourse in the United States had reinforced a notion of the progressive, liberal democratic identity of the United States as constructed in opposition to the retrograde, authoritarian identity of the 'Islamic world'

(Huntingdon, 1997). This polarisation, embodied by the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis, shaped the self-perception of the United States as a moral force identified by progressive, liberal and democratic values (Huntingdon, 1997). The interests of the United States, and the perceived threat posed by Iraq, was governed by this self-perception, and resulted in the abortive decision to invade, even when the imposition of liberal-democracy through force was construed as an 'irrational' act. The invasion of Iraq may be explained as a result of the discursive construction of an apocalyptic and ideological conflict between two world-views, which promoted the United States to exercise military force in order to secure their position within this conflict. The national identity discourse produced inside the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 lent popular support to the invasion, which was seen as a necessary assertion of the United States' moral right to lead on the international stage (Huntingdon, 1997).

Although Constructivism has played an important role in reinstating the significance of identity as a key driver of state behaviour, there remain a number of conceptual and methodological problems concerning the examination of 'state' identities as the key to understanding state behaviour and foreign policy. In essence, Constructivism may be understood as a theoretical or epistemological guiding 'principle', without a clear methodological framework. As Finnemore and Sikkink comment, "constructivism's distinctiveness lies in its theoretical arguments, not in its empirical research strategies" (2001: p.392). However, this methodological ambiguity (or perhaps, agnosticism) results in little guidance for how, in particular, state identities may be systematically examined. In the case of the war in Iraq, it is important to acknowledge that the 'state' is not a unitary actor, but rather a dynamic social institution composed of multiple identities that are dynamic and fluid. In this respect, Constructivist approaches, in some cases, may fall into the same form of

determinism that may be critiqued in Neo-Realism, with a preoccupation on an identifiable 'state' identity (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001). There is a need for greater methodological rigour and definition within the Constructivist paradigm in order to develop ways in which to examine state identity without falling into a reductive analysis.

Conclusion

Neo-Realist approaches largely fail to provide adequate explanations for the war in Iraq because they ignore the ideational and identity-related factors that govern state behaviour. The rigidity of the Realist paradigm cannot account for the shifting, interactively constituted character of the international state system, and the way in which, at the unit level, state interests are defined. The introduction of identity as a core prism of interpretation allows us to understand why, in the case of the Iraq war, the United States appeared to act against its own interests. The identity discourse that dominated the lead-up to the invasion was founded on the conception of an ideological struggle between 'civilisations', and created the conditions in which the invasion of Iraq was construed as essential to the security of the United States, despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary. Although Constructivist theories of IR have limitations, in the case of the Iraq war, they offer a more useful framework when compared to Neo-Realist approaches.

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