

## The Iraq War and International Relations



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### **Abstract:**

*The Iraq War exposes the new shape of world politics. It discredits the idea of a benign hegemon defending world order, content to be an 'offshore balancer', exercising its power through multinational institutions and constrained by mutually agreed rules. Rather, the hegemon, facing few external constraints in a unipolar world, is driven by the particularistic interests of its ruling group, in the pursuit of informal empire wherein military force is used to impose client regimes and economic subordination. The impotence of both a realist power balance and of liberal institutions to restrain it calls into question the main bases of global order, leaving imperial overreach as the main limitation on hegemonic power. Small states may be able to adapt to, even temporarily profit from, bandwagoning with the hegemon, but it is they that are potentially most threatened when a hegemonic power undermines the international constraints on the use of power.*

### **Introduction**

This essay examines some of the salient issues raised by the Iraq War for our understanding of international relations and, in particular, its implications for the rival paradigms of the international relations (IR) discipline. Arguably the war is such a watershed event in world politics that, like the end of the Cold War, it will set

research agendas for some years to come. This essay will highlight some of the problems that will need to be addressed; it will survey and interpret evidence and writing on the war and, in the light of pivotal literature, suggest some of its implications for IR theory and practice. Within this limited space, the essay can only raise rather than settle or systematically address many issues and claims. While chiefly concerned with the implications of the war for world order, as understood by rival IR theories, the essay will be particularly cognizant of the effect of this order on smaller states. While small states may be able to adapt to, even profit from, the war in the short run, in the long run it is they that are potentially most threatened when a hegemonic power undermines the international constraints on the use of power.

### **Iraq, Foreign Policy-Making and the Determinants of War**

The Iraq case throws light on the determinants of war, exposing how far decisions are driven by systemic factors as opposed to domestic values and interests. First of all, for the main belligerents, the United States and the United Kingdom, the impact of the system level, so central to realist thinking, appears to have been indeterminate, indeed permissive. Kenneth Waltz's 'defensive realist' image of systemic constraints and socialization shaping a prudent

defensive use of power does not appear to correspond to American behaviour, perhaps because the US hegemon, almost uniquely, has not experienced much of the trauma of war that socialized 'Old Europe'. 'Offensive realism', predicated on the notion that great powers can never have enough power in an insecure world, might seem more relevant, but even this is doubtful: its main proponent, John J Mearsheimer (2001) views hegemony as merely regional and hegemon as acting as offshore balancers outside their own regions. Seeing the Iraq War as going well beyond that, he denied that it was necessary to US security (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003). The world, at least as seen by the hawks at the core of the Bush administration, seemed not to be one of neo-realist material constraints or security dilemmas but one wherein merely normative constraints (such as international law) on the projection of overwhelming.

US power should and could be swept aside. Famously, a neo-con insider boasted, 'We're an empire now and when we act we create our reality' (Susskind 2004). When the system level ceases to be the major constraint on behaviour, as expected by neo-realism, there is much more scope for domestic determinants to drive policy—that is, for powerful states to do as they please at the expense of small ones. The lack of constraints on the US explains why it could readily go to war against Iraq, but not why its leaders wanted to do so and were able to carry the country into war. Hence, we need to look inside: domestic politics of a particular kind appears to provide the best explanation of the war. Strikingly, in both the main belligerent states, the US and UK, war was driven from the top by an ideologically minded leadership while the permanent bureaucracy—believed by the bureaucratic politics approach to shape outcomes—was systematically politicized or ignored. In the American case, a politicized 'special office' was set up to neutralize the career intelligence experts while networks of ideologically disciplined neo-cons cutting across the top layers of the national security apparatus successfully bypassed the bureaucratic checks and

balances designed to prevent arbitrary decisions. Similarly, in the UK, cabinet-level checks were so undermined by Blair's 'presidentialism' that UK policy ended up being driven chiefly by Blair's personal commitment to Bush (Cirincione 2003; Lang 2004; Scheuer 2004; Bamford 2004).

In the US, the ruling coalition, freed of bureaucratic and systemic constraints, proved remarkably free to launch what was very much a war of choice in disregard of the very serious risks involved. Given this, the war might, as many critics have argued, be best understood as a reflection of the very particular interests embedded in this coalition, namely the alliance around President George W Bush of certain oil/armaments interests<sup>2</sup> (as represented by, for example, Vice President Richard Cheney and perhaps Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld) and the neo-cons (with their Likudist viewpoint).<sup>3</sup> What is extraordinary about the Bush coalition was the assumption of direct decision-making power by the extremist wings of what had hitherto been merely two particularly powerful special interest lobbies traditionally concerned with Middle East policy. Also extraordinary and in need of explanation was the convergence in interests between the two groups; for while they had long checked each other in the policy process, their alliance allowed them to harness US foreign policy to their particularistic agendas. For 'structuralists' such as Roger Burback and Jim Tarbell (2004), control of oil and armaments spending, the keys to US empire and source of the superprofits that benefit its right-wing elites, is what drove the oil-arms faction. As Jan Pieterse (2004, 20) saw it, the second George W Bush administration represented the triumph of the Pentagon over the Department of Commerce, of territorially fixated oil and arms firms over globalised corporations. But equally important was the neo-con network through which the Israeli Likud party penetrated the policy process at the highest levels, driving what Pieterse (2004, 23) called the 'Israelization of US foreign policy'. The role of this trans-state network in driving the war is

remarkable because, while liberals see a role for such networks under conditions of complex interdependence, they specifically expect this to be confined to low politics—material interests subject to compromise. In this case, however, the decisive network included ‘identity movements’, Zionists and Christian fundamentalists, with a messianic agenda operating within the domain of peace and war. Finally, the particular interests of the ruling coalition were congruent with, cemented by and legitimised through a highly ideological worldview stressing American power and moral exceptionalism, as exemplified by the so-called Bush Doctrine (Jervis 2003; Farar 2004).

Certainly, Washington’s conception of the American interest was significantly moved off-centre with the rise of Bush’s coalition to power, marginalising the ‘realist’ establishment that had seen interests and threats in a rather different way. How was this narrow ‘cabal’<sup>4</sup> able to carry the world hegemon into war? According to Benjamin Barber (2003), the war was an anomaly, a function of the combination of an administration with an exceptional will to power and the special opportunity to exploit Americans’ fear of foreign threats after 9/11. Even so, to implement its war agenda, the ruling coalition had to overcome the constraints that democracy supposedly builds into the foreign policy process. Thus, checks and balances were systematically subverted and the opposition party failed to oppose (Fisher 2003). Emmanuel Todd (2003) argues that the corruption of US democracy by moneyed special interests enervated domestic checks on war. Farar (2004) argues that this allowed ‘impassioned minorities’ to defeat the ‘diffuse majorities’ mild policy preferences’. The successful effort of the Bush administration to mislead public opinion through ‘weapons of mass deception’ (Rampton and Stauber 2003) and ‘construct’ an imminent Iraqi threat by manufacturing intelligence, even though no such threat materially existed, is compatible with the constructivist view that interests and threats are constructed, rather than objective, as realism imagines. All other states were, in differing

degrees, caught between the demands of the hegemon and their own publics, but made quite varying choices. States’ position in the system, including state strength and geopolitical environment, appeared to affect how much choice they had to pursue their own interests in this situation, but much less so how they conceived this interest. Strong states facing few threats could afford, if their leaders wished, to stand with domestic opinion against the hegemon, as Germany and France did. Alternatively, they could use the war for their own interests, as did Japan and Britain, each of which sought enhanced great power status through association with Washington. Intermediate states, notably Russia and China, that had certain weaknesses but also exceptional strengths (nuclear arsenals, permanent United Nations Security Council [UNSC] seats, vast size/population) were driven by conceptions of their great power interests into opposing the hegemon without actively balancing against it. Smaller powers needed the hegemon (albeit for divergent reasons and to varying degrees) and had to make very difficult choices between it and (usually opposed) domestic opinion which were likely to be costly either way. Two pivotal groups of smaller states, both particularly in need of the hegemon and subject to its greatest pressures, chose to bandwagon. Eastern European elites saw their security and interest’s best protected by a hegemon that they still regarded as benign or at least still an offshore balancer against more proximate security threats (Russia).

In the Middle East, most state elites expected the war to be destabilizing but, viewing the US as less of a threat than neighbors or internal opposition against which they depended on Washington for security, saw no choice but to support their patron. Yet, if small states had fewer options and if many tended to bandwagon or adopt a low profile, what was striking was how far some were able to evade pressures from the hegemon which could threaten and induce but not dictate their policies. Thus, Washington was unable to get the UNSC votes for a war resolution of even weak states like Guinea and Cameroon and otherwise

friendly neighbors like Mexico. On 18 February 2003, when the UNSC allowed member states to speak on the impending war, all of 64 speakers over three days opposed war (Hiro 2005, 150). Of course, where a small state did overtly defy, indeed challenge, the hegemon, as in Syria's case, it did so at great risk and serious cost. Also striking is how little regime-type—democratic versus non-democratic—differentiated states' responses to the hegemon's drive for war. In Britain, Spain, Italy and Eastern Europe, leaders defied their publics to bandwagon with the hegemon.

In Germany and France they rode the crest of public opinion and defied the hegemon, and it was the deepening of Turkey's democracy that allowed public opinion to block the government's natural tendency to 'bandwagon' with its global patron. Ostensibly democratic state structures could seemingly either transmit public wishes into decision-making or buffer leaders from them. Less democratic or authoritarian states were also to be found on both sides of the war. In the Arab world, the episode consolidated the yawning cleavage between public opinion and non-democratic regimes that chose to appease the hegemon. The one exception, Syria, whose opposition to the war risked regime interests but reflected public opinion, was more authoritarian than most. Generally, the evidence on the determinants of foreign policy in the Iraq War lends little decisive support to any of the rival paradigms. Realism's systemic factors were indeterminate, especially for the hegemon, which was overtly propelled by domestic interests, transnational politics and 'constructed' fears rather than realism's security threats. Some combination of structuralism's material class interests and constructivism's view of how fear and identity are used to shape notions of threat seems better equipped to explain US behaviour. For other states, power position in the system made some difference for how far they were constrained by it, as realism would expect, but was never decisive, with states of similar power rankings actually making opposing decisions.

## Implications of the Iraq War for America's Global Role

The role of the US is the most important single factor shaping world politics and the global arena in which small states must operate. Iraq throws light on two sharply contrasting understandings of this factor—'hegemonic stability' and 'empire'—which carry profound implications for the security of small powers.

## Hegemonic Stability Theory Hegemonic stability theory (HST)

HST is a center-piece of the international relations and international political economy disciplines, is the main tradition that explicitly examines the role of the US in world politics. The American hegemon is thought not only to be much superior in power to all rivals, but also to perform global functions, delivering public goods crucial to world stability, and hence to exercise not just coercive domination but leadership based on consent.

The Iraq War exposes major weaknesses in HST. For liberals, US hegemony is benign and if the US is an empire it is an 'empire of invitation' that reluctantly assumes the defence of world order. For John Ikenberry (2001), US power is unthreatening, since the US is content to be an 'offshore balancer' and eschews territorial aggrandisement; because, being democratic, its policy is predictable and self-restraining, not arbitrary; and because its power is exercised through multinational institutions where it is constrained by mutually agreed rules. The Iraq War suggests that predictability, self-restraint and multilateralism no longer hold. The war denotes, too, that in the Middle East the US has become a partisan player, not a balancer, and that it does seek some territorial control, even if indirect. Ikenberry claims that US hegemony provides security and economic benefits, but its coercive hegemony in the Middle East has made the region the cockpit of global instability, putting global energy security at risk, encouraging terrorism and inflicting many of the costs on America's global and regional allies. Many of the small states of the Middle

East allied with the US had argued against the war on the grounds that it would unleash regional instability, but their concerns carried no weight in Washington and they have had to suffer the increased insecurity (Hinnebusch 2006). The main weakness of HST is that it fails to convincingly explain why the hegemon should exercise its power in a benign way; surely, the default expectation of both realism and Marxist structuralism is that unchecked power will be abused. According to Robert Jervis (2003), 'it is the exception rather than the rule for states to stay on the path of moderation when others do not force them to do so'. According to Duncan Snidal (1985), HST must at least identify the conditions under which hegemonic power will be exercised in benign or malign ways.

The Iraq case suggests that at least two conditions must be met if the hegemon is to be benign. One is systemic, that is, as AFK Organski (1968) points out, the existence of a 'number two' challenger state that could check or make unilateral power projection by the hegemon risky. Facing no such state, Washington had little incentive to maximise its coalition at the cost of restraining its ambitions, relying instead on an ad hoc 'coalition of the willing'. Without actually acknowledging it, HST assumes the countervailing power of a bi- or multi-polar world, but Iraq suggests that under unipolarity the problem of hegemony is not the traditional fear of HST that the hegemon lacks enough power to lead, but that excessive power may make it malign.

A second condition is the realist assumption that the hegemon can be treated as a rational actor defending the national interest that it presumably possesses in a stable world order that it dominates. Or, alternatively, as Marxist interpretations see it, defending the similar interest of world capitalism in stability. But, as Stephen Krasner (1978) recognised, the US policy process appears particularly vulnerable to colonisation by narrow special interests. In this case, those promoting Israeli interests openly advocated 'creative destruction' in the Middle East and the oil-and-arms

interests expected to benefit handsomely from war while ordinary American taxpayers, consumers and soldiers carried the burdens. When the policy process is captured by such narrow interests, the hegemon cannot be assumed to act in the national interest, much less to provide global public goods such as world order. The Iraq War arguably shattered the assumption that because the hegemon created and benefits most from the status quo, it has a natural interest in stability. Both the liberals' benign hegemon and the realist hegemon pursuing the national interest seem wide of the mark.

What does the war tell us about America's hegemonic capacity—that is, the legitimacy of its global leadership? Birthe Hansen (2000) sees world order as resting on the hegemon's unmatched power accompanied by the natural tendency of other states to bandwagon with it. What the Iraq War precipitated from most states was, in fact, neither overt bandwagoning nor balancing, but differentiated and ambivalent behaviour, that is, various mixes of semi-cooperation with and semi-resistance to the hegemon. Bandwagoning was quite limited (especially in comparison with the 1991 Gulf War); in only a few cases did states seem to cooperate with the hegemon because they thought the war legitimate or likely to deliver 'public goods'.

Thomas Volgy and Alison Bailin (2003) show convincingly that the US, lacking sufficient structural power for unilateral governance, cannot sustain global leadership except through the collective hegemony of the core powers. However, American unilateralism in Iraq damaged the cohesion of the core's collective hegemony. The consent needed for hegemony requires that it be exercised through multilateral institutions but the Iraq War not only damaged the UN but is congruent with Washington's increasing obstruction of the regimes on which global cooperation depends, whether in matters of climate change or of human rights. Moreover, Washington's insistence on unilateral control over Iraq and rebuff of UN authority

there obstruct a multilateral solution to the conflict and, indeed, make the country—and the region—a generator of terrorism. Pieterse (2004, 26, 29) argues that Iraq produced hegemony-in-reverse: ‘Never has so much soft power been squandered in so short a time.’ Nor can the US fight the ‘war on terrorism’ without international cooperation, as the US security elite has started to realise (Lobe 2005). Whether US authority can be restored depends on whether there is wide acceptance of the US claim that new threats—pariah states, terrorism, Islam itself—make its military hegemony indispensable to world order or whether other states will come to fear that Washington is itself part of the problem in helping to construct an otherwise avoidable ‘clash of civilisations’ which threatens this order.

### Theories of US Imperialism

Given the declining credibility of HST, it is perhaps not surprising that the notion of America as an empire is becoming central to contemporary political debate with numerous scholarly works published on the issue. Coercive empire is a possible substitute for hegemonic leadership and Iraq provides evidence of a decisive shift in the American role from the latter to the former. But what kind of empire is the US constructing and what does Iraq tell us about this? There is relative agreement that US Empire is informal. Globalisation theorists go further, however, and argue that contemporary ‘empire’ is a product of global capitalism, the world market and transnational corporations, rather than driven by state ambitions. In addition, they argue that contemporary ‘empire’ is non-territorial because power and wealth no longer directly derive from physical control of territories, which can, on the contrary, entail burdensome responsibilities (Hardt and Negri 2000). By contrast, the war supports the claim of James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer (2005) that empire is still state driven and of Chalmers Johnson’s (2004) that, however informal, US empire is one of global clients and military bases in which control of strategic territories remains pivotal. That a strategic territory ‘swimming in oil’<sup>5</sup> can be

seen by empire-builders as a prize rather than a burden suggests that globalization has emphatically not put an end to geopolitics. The war also demonstrates how crucial military force remains to empire, not least to entrenching informal systems of control in the face of popular resistance. Ronald Robinson (1984) regards empire as a system in which war puts in place largely economic instruments allowing durable exploitation of periphery states; Michael Klare (2002a; 2002b; 2003) claims that Iraq was a ‘resource war’ waged to establish control over Third World resources. Both these claims seem congruent with the Bush administration’s expectation that the war would ‘make Iraq [America’s] new strategic oil reserve’<sup>6</sup> and its proposals to open Iraq’s oil industry to foreign interests (Burback and Tarbell 2004, 155–157). Theories of ‘liberal imperialism’, such as Niall Ferguson’s (2004) view of US empire as a consensual one of invitation reluctantly assumed in a needed defense of world order, hardly seem compatible with the Iraq War, which was largely imposed on a skeptical or unwilling world and at risk to global order.

But is empire viable in the contemporary world? For a period, the utility of military force had been called into question, particularly by the Vietnam War. But in the post-Cold-War period, with the collapse of countervailing Soviet power and as a result of the ‘revolution in military affairs’, war again appeared to be a usable instrument of US power projection in the Third World. The US evidently did think it would fight a ‘virtual war’ in Iraq, dominated from the air, with few casualties, at little cost to itself, and requiring minimal sacrifice or commitment from its citizenry (Ignatieff 1999). However, the truism that war planners always plan to fight the last war, not the one they actually face, seems apropos in Iraq. To be sure, the Iraq campaign had little of a conventional state-to-state war, since Saddam Hussein’s obsolete army could hardly stand up to the US behemoth. In spite of this, the US ended up embroiled in some version of Mary Kaldor’s (1999) so-called ‘new wars’, an asymmetric power struggle over nationalism and

identity or else something close to an older kind of war of national resistance. The Iraq case suggests the continuing difficulty and high costs of translating even unprecedented military power into political victory over deep-rooted societal resistance. The lesson likely to be learned about whether military force retains its utility for empire-building cannot, however, readily be predicted. To be sure, America has been discomfited by the war, but Iraq, a state that had long defied Washington, has been virtually destroyed as a power and the latter could still end up considering the war to have been worth the cost. The war does, however, seem to signal that virtual wars may be special cases and not the post-Cold-War norm.

If that is so, then writers such as Michael Mann (2003) and Barber (2003) may be right that the neo-cons' apparent imperial ambitions are derived from an inflated idea of America's power. This is because its military muscle, unmatched by commensurate political and economic capabilities, merely increases resistance in the societies it targets. Robinson argued that 19th-century Empire depended on bargains between the imperial center and local collaborators but such collaborators cannot acquire much legitimacy in today's Muslim world and they depend on constant US protection. In Iraq the US has not even been able to provide physical protection for those who are seen to collaborate with it. The soft underbelly of US power in Todd's (2003) view is its reluctance to sustain casualties and to pay the costs of rebuilding the societies that it invades; certainly Washington hoped to do Iraq on the cheap and that is part of the reason for the difficulties it has faced.

Iraq is a test case of the neo-cons' project of liberal empire. Specifically, it tests whether wars of regime change followed by 'democratisation' of a sort can be a cost-effective formula for establishing stable states aligned with the world hegemon or whether such a project inevitably embroils the hegemon in 'imperial overstretch' (Kennedy 1987; Burbuck and Tarbell 2004). The outcome is bound to have an impact on

small states, particularly in the Third World. If this project succeeds, especially in the wake of the drive by the Western great powers to make sovereignty conditional and to legitimise 'humanitarian intervention', their sovereignty will become even more theoretical than it already is. If we take sovereignty to be the equivalent, at the international level, of democratic equality, then the outcome will be an increasingly hierarchic world. Moreover, the neo-con doctrine of 'creative destruction'—the use of US power to effect regime change even at risk of unleashing disorder—may well lead to more wars inflicting similar high costs on other weaker states. However, it seems likely, insofar as Iraq can be taken as typical, that such US intervention will only intensify the reaction from the Islamic world, which, as it is neutered by US power at the state level, increasingly takes trans-/sub-state 'terrorist' forms (al-Qaeda) amidst the chaos unleashed by 'regime change'.

### **Iraq's Significance for Theories of World Order**

**Realism and World Order: The Balance of Power** Iraq throws into considerable doubt the operability of realism's master key to world order, namely the balance of power. As Waltz (2000, 12, 27) observed, 'unchecked power is a threat, no matter who wields it'. However, the ability of the US to launch a war against the opposition of most other great powers shows how little a hegemonic superpower faces checks from a balance of power. Despite the widespread fear of the potential threat to world order from US unilateralism, and although some powers, perhaps France, China and Russia, thought the hegemon was seeking 'relative gains' at their expense, there was remarkably little anti-US balancing in the Iraq War while certain great powers, notably the UK and Japan, bandwagoned with the US. The war can hence be seen as an outcome of buckpassing whereby other powers failed to balance against the American aggressor.

Realism acknowledges that the balance of power may fail, but if an imbalance is now built into the unipolar system, then the main pillar of realist world order

seems obsolete. Whether that is so is debated among the realists themselves. William Wohlforth (1999) argued that US state-to-state power was so immense that no countervailing coalition was possible. Nor, perhaps, were the vital interests of other great powers sufficiently threatened in the Iraq case to provoke such power-balancing. Waltz (2000) believes that hegemons tend to overextend themselves and that eventually their misuse of power provokes balancing against them. Stephen Walt (2005) argues that this is already happening and that even Washington's close allies are now looking for ways to tame American might while the many other countries that fear it have devised numerous strategies to limit it. But so far there is no sign of a countervailing coalition prepared to actively check US power, leaving 'imperial overstretch' as the only apparent constraint on it.

According to 'historical materialists', the relative lack of balancing against the hegemon cannot be fully understood without appreciation of the structural (economic) power the US enjoys over other states in the world capitalist market and—especially in the core capitalist states—the reluctance of political elites to damage the trans-state capitalist networks that tie their dominant classes to those. The Iraq War and International Relations 459 in the US. To be sure, this did not keep states such as France and Germany from opposing the invasion, but in subsequently trying to repair relations through an acceptance of the occupation of Iraq, they give credence to the notion of a transstate 'collective hegemony' of the core over the Third World. Structural power and the existence of a trans-state capitalist class are, of course, concepts in the Marxist tradition (Gill 2003, 41–65, 73–115; Van der Pijl 1998) and largely neglected in the realist world where state-to-state military power counts the most. However, if Marxist analysis is right, such factors are permanently altering, if not disabling, the balancing mechanisms that used to underlie realist world order.

## **Liberal Institutionalism**

The Iraq War carries major significance for prospects, championed by liberals, that in the post-Cold-War era world order no longer need depend on the old power balancing. Power was being tamed by the growth of complex interdependence and a deepening international society, backed by checks inside democratic states and, at the supra-state level, by international organisation and law. By contrast, realists such as Krasner (2001, 19), dismissed these hopes, arguing, for example, that norms could not effectively constrain power because there were so many conflicting norms or interpretations of them that great powers would use those that suited their interests and ignore others that constrained them.

Krasner seems closer to the mark. Both of the mechanisms liberals expect to make for a democratic peace failed to prevent US war-making. Constraints on the executive within the US were as easily overridden as were those on the US from without, such as the UN and international law. The Bush administration's promulgation of a new doctrine of preventive war, justified by the norm of selfdefence, and its mobilisation of its own international lawyers to contest the conventional presumption against first use of force suggest that Krasner is right about the malleability of norms. Indeed, the war-makers threw off customary legal constraints with remarkable ease.

This is not, however, to argue that norms do not matter. That they do can be seen from the fact that the Iraq War was facilitated by the previous erosion of one of the main normative pillars of international order, sovereignty, by various attempts to make it 'conditional'. This has been done through the self-assumed right of supposedly benign great powers, widely backed by liberal opinion, to judge whether states fulfil these conditions and, if not, to undertake 'humanitarian intervention' against those they judge to be 'rogue' or repressive states. Whatever the merits of this argument in theory and in particular cases, by undermining the presumption against the first use of



force, it weakens one of the main normative restraints against predatory great powers on which world order rests.

As for the role of international institutions and the expected post-Cold-War empowerment of the UN, the lesson of the war for the organisation was highly ambivalent. The US failed to pressure the UN into setting aside international law or the presumption against the first use of force. On the other hand, this did not stop the American war and not a single UN member dared sponsor a resolution condemning it. This recalls the failure of the League of Nations to restrain great power aggression against weaker states—a failure that arguably set the stage for World War II. To be sure, in the aftermath of its invasion of Iraq, the US felt it needed UN legitimisation for its occupation, but it was readily able to extract this without conceding its sole control over Iraq to international supervision. The Iraq episode suggests that inter-state normative and institutional constraints are most effective when they are underlain or in congruence with material ones, specifically a balance of power. This long-understood basic realist principle of world governance has been lost sight of in the post-Cold-War period of liberal optimism.

## Conclusion

Needless to say, these observations can constitute no more than a start at adumbrating the implications of the Iraq War for our understanding of world politics. But several hypotheses can be suggested. First, as regards its determinants, the war appears to have been less a ‘realist war’, a product of systemic imperatives, than a war of choice (although it was allowed by the systemic power imbalance). It was specifically a product of narrow domestic interests, transnational networks and the ‘construction of fear’ in the US. Second, as regards the role of the US in world politics, the war is evidence of a shift from hegemony based on consent and shared interests to coercive empire; HST appears obsolete, at least in its benign liberal version. But the war also provides evidence that the

imperial alternative may not be sustainable except at high cost. Third, as regards the consequences for world order, the war marks a setback for the expectations of liberalism that such an order could be rooted in norms and institutions. This is all the more alarming in that the war, while re-validating the centrality of power in international politics, seems to signal the collapse of the main mechanism on which realists rely to temper the use of power, namely a balance. If ‘imperial overstretch’ fails to substitute for this, we may be in a new world order (or disorder) where Marxist theories of imperialism provide the most promising point of analytical departure.

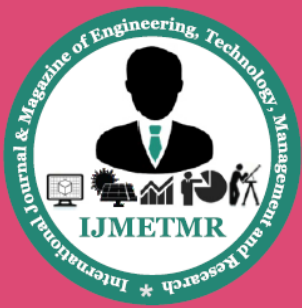
The implications for small powers are not reassuring. If bipolarity, in which the superpowers checked each other’s power projection, allowed small Third World powers a certain security and autonomy, these now seem at risk. Rather, the war demonstrates the dangers for them of unipolarity in which the once-benign hegemon becomes malign. It is no accident that small powers have traditionally put the highest value on international law and the UN and that the world hegemon uniquely deprecates the latter as unwanted constraints on its freedom to do as it pleases; their failure in the Iraq case makes for a less secure world for those at the bottom of the power hierarchy.

In confronting this emergent world order, small states did not behave uniformly, even though they arguably shared an interest in upholding constraints on the exercise of power by the strong. Many declined to be enlisted, despite enormous pressures and blandishments from Washington, in its ‘coalition of the willing’. But others chose, for different reasons, to bandwagon with the hegemon. This essay cannot attempt to systematically explain such variations in responses to similar systemic events by similarly small powers, but several observations can be made. Systemic material factors tend to push small powers into bandwagoning with a hegemon: regional threats may make them dependent on Washington’s ‘offshore balancing’ for security, while the economic

dependence that is typical of so many of them would make defiance of Washington too costly. Where smaller The Iraq War and International Relations 461 states nevertheless chose not to bandwagon, one would need to find explanations in domestic politics, such as public opinion that widely opposed the war, or the interests and ideologies of ruling elites—whether Third World anti-imperialism or small-state commitments to international law and institutions.

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