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THE WAR IN IRAQ: Morality or the National Interest?

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The real debate about the war in Iraq is not between idealists (who oppose this war on moral grounds) and realists (who see wars as a normal and sometimes necessary feature of international order). It is between two schools of realists, with differing conceptions of the “national interest”, judged in the context of the costs and benefits of the war in terms of its stated objectives outlined by the United States.

In defending its decision to launch the attack on Iraq, the Bush administration has offered three main justifications. The first is Iraq’s suspected development of weapons of mass destruction. The second is Iraq’s alleged link with terrorist groups, including the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US. The third is the repression and misrule of the Iraqi people by the Saddam Hussein regime, which has reduced a once prosperous nation to ruin.

While the Bush administration’s initial justification for the war related chiefly to the first two factors during the final stages of preparation for the war, it stressed the third rationale. However, evidence is far from conclusive on the first justification while there is little evidence to support the second.

Moral Argument

For those who take a moral stand against the war, it is the third reason which is the most difficult to argue against. Considering the brutality of the Saddam Hussein regime and the misery and damage it had inflicted on its own people, there is considerable justification for resort to armed intervention in Iraq to produce a regime change. The use of force to oust the Saddam Hussein regime and replace it with a more humane and democratic ruler could well recommend itself.

But such a war, idealists would argue, could only be justified under two conditions. First, it should be authorised by the UN. Second, it should be undertaken only after all other means, including diplomacy and containment, had been exhausted. Neither of the conditions was fulfilled before the current military campaign by US and allied forces began.

Not all idealists are against the use of force to achieve worthy collective objectives by the international community. Many in this camp are proponents of collective security (use of collective force to punish and repel aggression) and humanitarian intervention (use of force to punish dictators accused of gross violations of human rights). But for them, the current

campaign against Iraq does not meet the criteria of collective security or a just war. More time should have been given to the weapons inspectors and more efforts made to achieve a compromise at the UN Security Council.

Yet, whether such actions as prescribed by the idealists would have led to Iraqi compliance is open to debate. The more powerful arguments against the war have come not from the idealists, but from those who think hard through the costs and benefits of unilateral military action in meeting the very objectives outlined by the war's proponents, especially the Bush administration. Realists from Sun Tzu to Hans Morgenthau had advised that national interests, especially in going into war, must be defined in terms of a cost-benefit analysis.

Hence, it is important to ask: will this war deter other countries from acquiring weapons of mass destruction? Not really, if North Korea's nuclear ambitions go unchecked. In fact, any further neglect of the North Korea crisis by the US will mean that the war against Saddam, including its "axis of evil" rationale, which stoked North Korean insecurity, would actually end up worsening the global proliferation problem. Will the war reduce the risk of international terrorism? Again, the answer is: not really. In fact, the opposite could happen, as the war provokes Muslim anger and adds fire to the terrorist ideology and recruitment.

Hence, one does not have to be a pacifist and join the anti-war demonstrations to realise the dangers created by this war. The risk of terror attacks on America and its allies has increased. There is every reason to think that the war will leave deep scars in the psyche of Muslim peoples which could destabilize pro-US regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

In this connection, the third professed US objective: the ouster of the Saddam dictatorship and its replacement by a popular regime as a step towards the eventual democratisation of the Middle East, assumes importance. It is doubtful that rulers in the Middle East who have sided with the US could hope to gain politically if the objective of democratisation really takes hold as a long-term goal of the US in the region. And many realist scholars and policy makers believe that democratisation in the Third World is a prescription for greater conflict and disorder. Hence, in terms of its stated objectives, the current Gulf War does not vindicate the realist position and preferences about international order.

National Interest

Nations backing the US in its war against Iraq have invoked the "national interest" to justify their position. This is entirely understandable. Both realists and moralists agree on the primacy of national interest. As President John F. Kennedy proclaimed in 1963, "every nation determines its policy in terms of its own interests."

Yet, national interest is a highly politicised and elastic notion subject to differing interpretations and manipulation. First, who defines what is national interest? Should it be the state exclusively or should it also take into account the views of various domestic groups, whether they are ethnic minorities, civic organizations, media, or even those protesting the war in the streets of London, Sydney and Manila? As Martha Finnemore, a Political Scientist at George Washington University, reminds us "much of international politics is about defining rather than defending national interests."

The meaning of national interest can vary widely, from increasing a state's power to the survival of a state to upholding international legitimacy. Many realists assume that national

interests are mainly material, existing outside of perceptions. Yet, perceptions do matter, sometimes more than reality.

In the current war, if country X claims that its national interest is served by siding with the US, what does it really mean? It can mean that country X is so dependent on US military support (or US primacy and power more generally) that its national security would be undermined by opposing the US campaign and thereby prompting the US to cut-off its aid or withdraw its US security umbrella. Or national interest can mean that country X itself feels utterly vulnerable to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, or some combination thereof, directly or indirectly (for example if such weapons fall into the hands of the terrorists in its own soil). Or national interest can mean that country X stands to gain increased US aid by offering political and logistical support to the US.

While many governments, enjoying a monopoly over defining the national interest, have invoked the concept, few have clarified to the international community and their people what exactly it is in this given crisis and which elements of the national interest are most important.

Is the loss of the credibility and effectiveness of the UN, however imperfect in the past, not damaging to the national interest of weak and vulnerable states, big or small? Will not the undermining of the Security Council's authority weaken the campaign to reduce the danger of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction? Will not the undermining of US moral authority, especially its image as a "benign superpower", damage the interests of those who have for decades relied on American military presence for their security and stability?

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