

Beyond the Realist Theories: “Neo-Conservative Realism” and the American Invasion of Iraq

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The American war on terror and the invasion of Iraq remain spectacular developments in the history of international relations. This article probes the explanatory powers of the existing academic realist theories to account for the Bush administration's war against Al-Qaeda, a non-state shadowy organization, and the invasion of Iraq. It argues that the realist theories are largely deficient frameworks to provide any satisfactory explanation of the war on terror and its subsequent extension to Iraq. This paper also proposes an alternative framework, the framework of “neo-conservative realism,” to offer a more satisfactory explanation of America's war on terror. The framework of “neo-conservative realism,” in contrast to the existing realist theories, is more flexible to account for the current neo-conservative outgrowth of American foreign policy and national security strategy.

Keywords: realist theories, war on terror, invasion of Iraq, neo-conservative realism

Stephen M. Walt, a noted American realist, writing some 3 years ago, identified two basic criteria to judge any theory: (a) the explanatory powers of a theory to account for any developments within its field and (b) the theory's internal fertility (Walt 2002:201–202). While the first criterion is about the powers of a theory to explain events happening in the real world, the second criterion is concerned with the ability of the theory to refine and expand itself to cover the range of phenomena that fall within its theoretical grip. Put together, the two theoretical criteria are all about how powerfully a theory can provide explanations to anomalies or critical objections that might arise from time to time and whether a theory would be in a position to repair itself to address the anomalies and critical objections. Judged against these two criteria, realist theories, Walt opines, remain important and quite powerful to cover most developments in international politics.

Walt was, of course, responding to the fierce critiques labeled against realist theories after the disintegration of the Cold War and the resultant transition from a bipolar to a unipolar world. A group of scholars (e.g., Kegley 1993, 1995; Rosecrance and Stein 1993; Lebow 1994; Koslowski and Kratochwil 1994; Vasquez 1997), at the end of the long persisting Cold War by the early 1990s and in the absence of a strong rival to America, questioned the basic premises of the realist theories and found them irrelevant to explain developments in the post-Cold War world. The academic obituaries to realist theories were soon rejected by many realist theorists. Walt, for example, persuasively argues that despite the collapse of

the Cold War structures in East–West relations, realist theories still remain valid to explain the feelings of insecurity of states and their responses to changes in the distribution of powers in the international system. This is exactly because states assess their positions vis-à-vis their rivals and attempt at enhancing power at the cost of actual or potential rivals. The inability of states to engage in extensive collaboration to produce mutual gains brings home the point that military force remains a fact of international political life. The struggle for survival through the enhancement of power positions vis-à-vis rivals is a well-calculated rational game and would continue indefinitely (Walt 2002:197–198).

Admittedly, the range of explanatory powers of the realist theories remains quite strong to account for issues in power politics involving great and major powers. But anomalies might arise when issues outside the regular pattern come to the center stage of international politics and dominate political and military decisions of the most powerful state in the international system. One such anomaly has been the American “war on terror” launched against Al-Qaeda in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attack and its subsequent extension to Iraq. Indeed, the American war on terror and the occupation of Iraq in March 2003 is a spectacular development in world history as well as international relations. Three significant features make this war one of the most remarkable events in international relations. First, this is perhaps history’s most unequal war fought between the world’s militarily most powerful state and a weak, militarily easily vulnerable and economically collapsing Arab state. Second, the George W. Bush Jr. administration justified the war on the ground of a new specter of threats originating from Iraq’s alleged programs of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which subsequently proved wrong. Third is the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s alleged links to terrorist organizations, most notably Al-Qaeda, which is seen as a major threat to American values and interests worldwide.

The September 11, 2001, attack on America and the American harsh military response to Al-Qaeda and Iraq have resulted in a new security environment in which the world’s lone superpower is deeply engaged in a war against a nonstate shadowy organization—Al-Qaeda. The serious questions are: do realist theories capture the dynamics of America’s war against Al-Qaeda and the invasion of Iraq on grounds that subsequently proved wrong? If not, what theoretical framework can explain the decision of the Bush administration to fight Al-Qaeda and invade Iraq? The basic objective of this paper is to examine the explanatory powers of the realist theories of international relations to account for America’s war against Al-Qaeda, a nonstate actor, and Iraq, a non-threatening state. It argues that existing academic realist theories are largely deficient frameworks to provide a satisfactory explanation of America’s decision to invade Iraq and its war against a concept, the nonstate transnational network of Islamic fundamentalists known as Al-Qaeda. The changed nature of threats posed by Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations has created real dilemmas for the realist theorists.

This paper proposes a framework of “neo-conservative realism”—to better explain America’s war against Al-Qaeda, and its war move against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Neo-conservative realism should be best understood as an outgrowth of American foreign policy and national security strategy in their current context, rather than a general theory of state behavior. Whereas other variants of realism purport to provide general explanations of state behavior across the board, the framework of neo-conservative realism aims at explaining the promotion of national interests by a particular state—the United States of America. In an attempt to develop this argument, this paper begins with a brief overview of the different theoretical variants of realist theories, and then proceeds to identify the areas where realist theories have a feeble voice to explain the war against Al-Qaeda and the invasion of Iraq. In the final part, the paper develops the framework of “neo-

conservative realism” and identifies its flexibility to account for the Bush administration’s decision to wage war against Al-Qaeda as well as invade and occupy Iraq.

Conflicts, Wars, Peace, and the Realist Theories

Traditionally, the issues of war, peace, and conflict have been the exclusive focus of the realist theories of international relations. Originally articulated by Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, E.H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, and subsequently further modified and enriched by Kenneth Waltz (1979), the realist theories of international relations depict a gloomy picture of international system as anarchic, treat nation-states as the primary constituent units of that system, and promote the view that states are fundamentally engaged in the struggle for survival through maximization of power. The existence of numerous states in the anarchic international system renders an acute problem of insecurity for each of them and thus encourages a constant competition for power, particularly between the major and Great Powers. International relations is thus viewed as a self-help system where every state must strive to ensure its own security and survival. If one state emerges as the most powerful state at any given time, other major and Great Powers would tend to counter that powerful state by forming a counterbalance of power.

The classical realists emphasize human aggressiveness as the prime cause of war. Hans J. Morgenthau, who first developed political realism as a well-articulated theory of international politics, rejected the logic of rational and moral political order premised on abstract principles, such as human goodness and “infinite malleability of human nature.” He depicts the world as an outcome of forces that accompany and guide human nature. In Morgenthau’s own words: “. . . the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature. To improve the world one must work with those forces, not against them” (Morgenthau 1960:4). The forces inherent in the nature of human beings give rise to conflicts and opposing interests that make the world an imperfect place for the realization of moral principles. A host of other causes that might lead to war include a state’s craving for military and material power that immediately alerts its rivals, the lack of a central authority to manage global affairs, and the revisionist goals of certain states that might challenge the status quo. In brief, the gloomy human nature in the international system creates permissive conditions for war.

The effective way to deter wars and aggressions, the classical realists opine, is to form balances of power that might discourage states to wage wars and help promote conditions for the status quo. The concept of balance of power is not, however, situated in a wider systemic context but interpreted as psychological predispositions of statesmen. The necessity of balance is simply conceived of in terms of preventing any one state from dominating other states. Said differently, the purpose of balance of power is to achieve stability in the international system and thus preserve the multiplicity of the units that comprise the system. Morgenthau (1960:169) writes: “The means employed to maintain the equilibrium consist in allowing the different elements to pursue their opposing tendencies up to the point where the tendency of one is not so strong as to overcome the tendency of the others, but strong enough to prevent the others from overcoming its own.” Although balance of power aims at achieving stability, intervening variables may inject changes in the current balance continuously. Historical evidences in Europe and elsewhere testify that states faced with dangers of war tend to form balances of power to deter war.

The preoccupation with human aggressiveness and the emphasis on maintaining power balance between states had soon generated widespread dissatisfaction with the classical realist theory of international relations. Critics were quick to point out that the theory de-emphasized positive interactions and cooperative designs between states, and overlooked growing interdependence in the international system and the gradual development of international legal norms to govern and regulate

interstate relations. Briefly speaking, classical political realism was more concerned with negative aspects of human beings and the dark underside of interstate relations. In the face of growing criticisms, some realists made attempts to save the theory from its alleged obsolescence. Kenneth N. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) was the first serious attempt to modify the classical realist theory, and set it on a firmer scientific basis that rests on the empiricist/positivist tradition of international relations.

Kenneth Waltz accepts anarchic conditions as an autonomous causal force in the international system and treats states as the basic units of the system. He essentially uses a Hobbesian view of international politics when he starts with central assumptions like this: "The state among states, it is often said, conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence. Because some states may at times use force, all states must be prepared to do so—or live at the mercy of their militarily more vigorous neighbors. Among states, the state of nature is a state of war" (Waltz 1979:102). Waltz, however, prefers to locate the pattern of actions/reactions of states within the systemic context. The systemic anarchic conditions, according to him, create an insecurity dilemma for states, and force them to worry about their security. The distribution of powers within the international system would define its basic character and promote a general tendency on the part of the states to balance against strong or aggressive powers. The internal preferences of a state are important but international outcomes are shaped more by the presence of and interactions with other states (Waltz 1979:65).

Waltz strongly argues that systemic pressures in an anarchic setting compel states to adopt appropriate policies to enhance their power and security, primarily through the formation of balances of power. He appears to have used the concept of balance of power in at least three different but inter-related meanings: (i) balance as a policy of sheer survival of states; (ii) balance as a requirement of the structural anarchy in the international order; and (iii) balance as the self-perpetuation of the international system. The primary goal of every state is to ensure survival, if necessary, through balancing with some states against some other states. In Waltz's formulation: "If some states seek an advantage over others, they combine; if other states want to counteract this advantage, they in turn combine. . . . Pursuing a balance of power policy is still a matter of choice, but the alternatives are those of probable suicide on the one hand and active playing of the power politics game on the other" (Waltz 1979:100). What necessarily follows from this formulation is that the active playing of the game of power politics is linked to the structural anarchy in the international system. While operating under anarchical conditions, states look for their own security and view other states as potential threats. The necessity to ensure survival forces states to adopt policies of self-preservation that eventually contributes to the self-perpetuation of the international system. In this system, states are logically self-help units and mostly survive structural anarchy. As systemic pressures lead to conflicts between states, Waltz argues, it is possible to identify the dangerous conditions and mitigate them beforehand if appropriate policies are adopted. The positive side of Waltz's theory is that, unlike the classical realists who were more focused on pessimistic human nature, he advocates policies of moderation between states.

The Waltzian theory of structural realism no doubt has greatly rescued the classical realist theory by shifting attention from gloomy human nature to competitive systemic pressures that define the basic parameters of security/insecurity for states. There were still sharp intellectual reactions to this rescue attempt and Waltz drew heavy fire from realist, liberal as well as poststructuralist scholars. Many scholars of the realist camp (particularly Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993) accuse Waltz of being immune to change in the international security system, the liberal scholars find his emphasis on anarchy and systemic determinants historically inaccurate (Ruggie 1983), while the poststructuralists interpret his theory as an attempt to legitimate a

dangerous discourse of power politics (e.g., Ashley 1984). The criticisms have encouraged many other realist scholars to further improve and build on Waltz's theory of structural realism or simply neorealism. Stephen Walt (2002:204–210) classifies and characterizes the new generation of structural realist or neorealist scholars into two broad camps—the defensive realists and the offensive realists.

Defensive realists (Van Evera 1984; Walt 1989; Snyder 1991; Glaser 1994–1995; Lynn-Jones 1995) accept Waltz's basic premises that anarchy remains at the heart of insecurity of states and that states survive by forming balances of power but they prefer to include other factors, such as geography and technology, that impact the security environment of states. They introduce a new concept of *offense–defense balance*, defined as “relative ease or difficulty of conquest,” to explain security competition between states (see Van Evera 1984). The powerful states commanding sophisticated military technology would overcome the constraints of geography easily and endanger the security of other states. The frequency of war would increase. The two theoretical additions of the defensive realists are: (a) defensive military postures help states to promote security while posing no threats to the security of other states, and (b) territorial expansion is difficult and unprofitable (Walt 2002:204–205). In other words, defensive realists support policies to promote the status quo and view aggressive wars as inconsistent with the rational behavior of states. The major difficulties with the defensive realist position is that it is too difficult to measure the offense–defense capabilities of states, and states rarely accept this posture as a solution to their security problems (Walt 2002:206).

The offensive realists (Labs 1997; Zakaria 1998; Copeland 2000; Mearsheimer 2001) take issue with the defensive realist position and point out that defensive realists who favor states' survival through the promotion of status quo are unable to explain why some states threaten the status quo and undertake costly conquests. The answer, according to them, lies in the incapacity or inability of states to figure out accurately the real intentions of other states that might undertake aggressive designs in future. While the defensive realists do not necessarily overlook the uncertainty about intentions driving state behavior, the offensive realists appear to pay more attention to this factor. The inability to know each other's intentions, the offensive realists argue, compels states to increase their power to meet any future challenges. Whereas the defensive realists discourage individual states to pursue a policy of power maximization (but encourage them to form balance of power) in order not to provoke hostile military acts on the part of other states, the offensive realists suggest that major powers are engaged in fierce competition to improve their relative power position. It is the maximization of power that ensures the survival of states. Great Powers, in an attempt to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic power, may not fight each other directly, and would probably pick up some other states to fight for themselves. In contrast to defensive realist position, the offensive realists also argue that expansion through conquest may bring benefits for the conqueror. Although states are not constantly engaged in warfare, the great and major powers happen to be opportunistic aggressors who hardly hesitate to outmatch their rivals. The offensive realist position is, however, less supported by historical case studies. The American unwillingness to exploit its military and economic superiority and thus launch a military offensive against the former Soviet Union immediate in the postwar period is a case at hand (Walt 2002:206–209).

At this stage, it is possible to identify some of the commonly shared basic theoretical postulates of the realist theories. Although the different variants of realist theories maintain discernible subtleties in their interpretation of real-world events, they appear to share the following theoretical properties:

- anarchy is an autonomous force of the international system and war is a constant possibility under anarchic conditions;

- great and major powers always suspect each other's intentions and are deeply engaged in endless competition for power to improve their relative power positions and thus ensure survival; and
- unequal distribution of powers in the international system contributes to an unstable international order. Systemic inequality in power distribution may encourage Great Powers to undertake aggressive and costly wars to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis their perceived or real rivals.

It is important to note that all realist theories, other than the classical realists who accept human nature as the starting point, revolve around the concept of anarchy or systemic anarchy and the possibility of wars between great and major powers. No political realist has ever written, even for the sake of theoretical ruminations, about the possibility of an actual war between the most powerful state in the international system and a nonstate actor, a transnational organization representing some radical objectives that sharply contradict the values and interests of the most powerful state. Similarly, an actual war between the most powerful state and one of the weakest and most vulnerable states in an unprovoked situation and on the basis of an alleged connection to a terrorist organization did not catch any serious realist attention either. Realist theorists have extensively written on the need to avoid picking fights with Third World countries but the invasion and occupation of Iraq under the rubric of “war on terror” remains a perplexing phenomenon. The next section analyzes whether realist theories can come up with a satisfactory explanation of the war between the United States on the one hand and Al-Qaeda and Iraq on the other.

Realist Theories, War on Terror, and the Invasion of Iraq

Most international relations scholars and commentators share the view that the international security environment has undergone qualitative changes in the post-September 11, 2001, attack on New York and Washington, DC. Shortly after the attack, President George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union speech and declared a war on terror. This was a new kind of war aimed at defeating terror and getting the world rid of fear for good. The president emphatically said:

Great harm has been done to us. . . . Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us. Our nation—this generation—will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. . . . The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them. (Bush 2001)

The war on terror primarily meant a major war to dismantle the organizational networks of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and deny the Qaeda leadership any foothold elsewhere. The rationale of the war was outlined in a militarily very significant document—*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*—issued in September 2002. This document, which is also known as the Bush Doctrine, is in reality a compilation of President Bush's different speeches delivered after the catastrophic attack. Chapter V: “Prevent Our Enemies from Threatening Us, Our Allies and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction” outlines the Bush administration's use of force approach and policy. It defines threat as the combination of “radicalism and technology.” In the words of President Bush:

The gravest danger to freedom lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology, when that occurs, even weak states and small groups

could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations. Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. (*National Security Strategy*, p. 13)

The new definition of threat marks a serious departure from the post-World War II concept of security that defined security as the immunity of a state or nation to threats emanating from outside its boundaries. Nation-states, hostile to each other, were the principal sources of threats. The new definition, in contrast, singles out three sources of threat agents: terrorist organizations capable of striking anywhere in the globe, including the American heartland; weak states that harbor terrorist organizations; and rogue states that massacre their own people and are determined to acquire WMD. While the first two threat agents referred to Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan, the third threat agent specifically pointed to Iraq, the target of invasion after Afghanistan. The identification of terrorist organizations with access to deadly military technology, in particular, adds a serious element to the current international security environment.

Another notable feature of the *National Security Strategy 2002* is its repudiation of the Cold War concepts of deterrence and containment. Although deterrence still remains valid to prevent dangerous states from undertaking dangerous moves, it commands less value with regard to rogue states and terrorist organizations. The *National Security Strategy* states: "In the cold war we faced a generally status-quo, risk-averse adversary . . . But deterrence based only on threat of retaliation is less likely to work against leaders of rogue states more willing to take risks, gambling with the lives of their own people, and the wealth of their nations. . . . Traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy" (*National Security Strategy*, p. 15). Deterrence, according to this argument, fails exactly because terrorist organizations neither represent any particular people nor any exact chunk of territory. Rather, they carry out horrible acts of destruction and killings through the use of secret networks and communication channels. In his address to the West Point Military Academy in New York on June 1, 2002, President Bush emphasized: "Deterrence, the promise of massive retaliation against nations, means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend" (Bush 2002a).

Clearly, the projection of new threats, the identification of a new set of threat agents, and the abandonment of the traditional deterrence theory to deal with new threats and threat agents are something new within the parlor of security studies. Terrorist organizations bent on realizing radical objectives or carrying out carnages are nothing new in international politics; what is new is their capacity to strike at the heart of the most powerful nation on earth. This unprecedented terrorist capacity not only changed the security environment, but it has also brought about some qualitative dimensions to the pattern of interstate relations. For example, the *National Security Strategy 2002* poses a dangerous threat to the sovereign equality of nation-states enshrined in the United Nations Charter. In the wake of the September 11 attack, President Bush declared that America had the right to pursue terrorists anywhere and bring them before justice. The right to seek out and destroy terrorist organizations anywhere in the world grants the United States an imperial role while subjecting other states to the mercy of the American leadership. Even before the September 11 attack, President Bush sounded an arrogant unilateralism in American foreign policy; his administration refused to be a party to the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court but decided to move ahead with the National Missile Defense Program ignoring vigorous domestic and international opposition (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002; Mandelbaum 2002).

The war against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, with strong support from allies and friends, entered a new dangerous phase when President Bush linked Iraq with the wider war on terror and identified the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as a source of

imminent danger requiring pre-emptive strike. At a public rally in Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 7, 2002, the president made it clear that Iraq was the next target of attack after Al-Qaeda. The Iraq factor split the post-9/11 coalition against terrorism and sharply divided American public opinion over the rationale of the invasion of Iraq. In an attempt to tide over public criticisms, President Bush justified the preemptive strike against Iraq on two counts: link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, and Saddam's programs of WMD. On the link between Saddam and Al-Qaeda, the president referred to information unknown to the Americans and the world. He said:

Over the years Iraq has provided safe heaven to . . . [terrorists]. And we know that Iraq is continuing to finance terror and gives assistance to groups that use terrorism to undermine Middle East peace. We know that Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network share a common enemy—the United States of America. . . . Some al-Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq. These include one very senior al-Qaeda leader who received medical treatment in Baghdad this year, and who has been associated with planning for chemical and biological attacks. We've learnt that Iraq has trained al-Qaeda members in bomb-making, poisons and deadly gases. And we know that after September 11th, Saddam Hussein's regime gleefully celebrated the terrorist attacks on America. (Bush 2002b)

The charge against Iraq's alleged WMD programs was more serious. In President Bush's opinion, actions were necessary not only to save the allies in the Middle East, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey, but also to maintain stability in the whole region. The president clearly said:

Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are controlled by a murderous tyrant who has already used chemical weapons to kill thousands of people. This same tyrant has tried to dominate the Middle East, has invaded and brutally occupied a small neighbor, has struck other nations without warning, and holds an unrelenting hostility toward the United States. By its past and present actions, by its technological capabilities, by the merciless nature of its regime, Iraq is unique. (Bush 2002b)

The Bush administration cohorts successfully followed the lead of the president to convince American people and the international community that Saddam Hussein was really a grave danger to world peace and security. Condoleezza Rice, for example, in an attempt to justify the invasion, told the CNN on September 8, 2002, "We don't want the smoking gun to become a mushroom cloud" (quoted in Scott Peterson 2002). Unfortunately, neither the "war president" nor his war team came out successful in establishing any linkage between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein or in finding out any trace of chemical or biological weapons in Iraq.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq by the Bush administration poses some challenges to all varieties of realist theories. The invasion took place at a time when the United States was the undisputed leader of the post-Cold War unipolar world, with Europe, Japan, the Russian Federation, and China falling far behind. Despite a relative decline compared with Japan and the European Union, America still tops the list of nations of the world in terms of economic, political, military, and cultural powers. The vast possession of both hard and soft powers, the choice of America as the hub of international investment, the acceptability of the American dollar as international currency, and high-quality diplomacy put America as the number one nation in the world. The Americans still command the globe's most resources, produce 30% of world product, and their economy is still 40% larger than the nearest rival (see Cox 2001:21). The American supremacy was not definitely challenged by Saddam Hussein provoking hostile military acts by the current American leadership. Iraq, judged by any yardstick of power, was not a great or major power

posing any serious challenges to American security or national interests. The UN sanctions imposed in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War already crippled Iraq and its military muscle, effectively blocking any possibility of WMD development by the Saddam Hussein regime.

All variants of realist theories predict war between major and Great Powers, provided they perceive real challenges from each other and if wars are seen as necessary to improve relative power positions. The defensive realists support the status quo by arguing that defensive military postures strengthen national security of a state while posing no threats to its rivals. Expansions by powerful states, according to them, do not produce major benefits. The offensive camp of structural realism, in contrast, predicts that Great Powers may undertake opportunistic aggressions if conquests are deemed to produce benefits for the conquerors. The classical realists clearly state that human aggressiveness and anarchy might precipitate devastating warfare between nations. It can be argued that none of the realist positions clearly explains the catastrophic American invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq clearly defies the position of the defensive realists that status quo-promoting policies help strengthen national security and promote peace. Opportunistic aggressions to accrue major benefits, as argued by the offensive realists, do not apply to the Iraq invasion in any major way. The argument that the invasion of Iraq was largely influenced by American motivation to take direct control of the huge oil resources of Iraq and West Asia, which closely validates the offensive realist position, rather appears feeble (for such arguments, see Research Unit for Political Economy 2003). The United States was already controlling the vast oil resources of Saudi Arabia and other tiny kingdoms in the Gulf region. It was also extending its control over the Caspian Sea oil resources by cultivating good relations with and promoting friendly regimes in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is true that America was much concerned about the oil agreements that the Saddam Hussein regime concluded with Russian and French oil companies, but those agreements were not posing any serious dangers to American oil interests and security. Additionally, America was not faced with any fuel shortage or a long-term threat to its oil interest that might create such shortage in the future. Aggressive human nature did play a small role in the invasion, at least viewed from the side of the victim of invasion. Saddam Hussein, in the wake of UN sanctions, did not behave irresponsibly; he rather proved to be a rational actor and could be deterred by means other than the invasion (see Kriesler 2003).

The way in which the invasion of Iraq was undertaken and executed based on ungrounded threats and in an unprovoked environment makes it difficult to apply the realist framework to explain America's war decisions against Al-Qaeda and Iraq. Most importantly, realists of all stocks vehemently opposed the planned invasion of Iraq. In the weeks preceding the diplomatic forays and military build-up to the Iraq war, a group of international relations scholars published a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on September 26, 2002. The signatories to the advertisement included some well-known realist thinkers, including John Mearsheimer, Kenneth Waltz, and Stephen Walt. The advertisement questioned the very rationale on which President Bush tried to justify the war, expressed doubts about the connection between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, and interpreted the WMD threats posed by the Saddam regime as unrealistic and fabricated (Group of Authors 2002). George F. Kennan, one of the few surviving classical realists of our time and the architect of the theory of containment of Soviet communism, found President Bush's quick run to the Iraq war unjustified and unpalatable. He expressed serious concern about the postinvasion consequences and criticized the Democratic Party for its failure to scrutinize the war aims of the Republican president (Kaufman 2002). The gulf differences over the invasion of Iraq between the realist theorists and the neoconservative realists notwithstanding, their fear about Al-Qaeda was

identical. They agreed that Al-Qaeda could not be deterred if it acquired nuclear or biological weapons. To put it in simple terms, both sides admitted the failure of deterrence against nonstate shadowy organizations that operate secretly.

The realist opposition to the Iraq war, a careful analysis would suggest, was based on two specific grounds—first, small states have little influence on the balance of power. In other words, maintaining balance of power between great and major powers is more important, and fights between great and weak powers should be avoided. Second, occupation is a hugely costly game not only in economic and military terms but also in terms of serious resistance to the occupation forces. Nationalism remains a mighty powerful force specifically in the Third World, and it leads to deadly insurgencies or struggles for freedom when countries like Vietnam or Iraq are occupied. This theoretical realist opposition is, however, more a prescription for restraint than an actual explanation of the Iraq war.

The growing unease of the realists with the invasion and occupation of Iraq lends some degree of credence to the point that the existing realist theories or academic realism fall short of explaining this historic event satisfactorily. Perhaps, the concept of “neo-conservative realism,” which is related to the realist theories but uses a much wider concept of national interest involving security and the promotion of American ideology and values, can better explain how the Bush administration planned and executed the invasion of Iraq, unilaterally defying the opposition of the allies and the wider international community. As developed and elaborated in the next section, “neo-conservative realism,” like the academic realist theories, accepts the concept of national interest as a foundation stone but not in the strict sense of security or prosperity traditionally invoked by realists of all stripes. National interest, the neo-conservative realists would define, stands for an unchallenged American global leadership and the expansion of the American empire of liberty, democracy, and free market backed by a mighty military machine. The purpose of military power is to prop up the empire of liberty and freedom by challenging and eliminating anti-American regimes, organizations, and values.

“Neo-conservative Realism” and America’s Iraq War

For one thing, President Bush sounded like a realist even before he was elected the president of the United States in 2000. During his 2000 electoral race to the White House, George Bush, then Texas Governor, in a major foreign policy speech, projected the image of an American president as “a clear-eyed realist” (Bush 1999). This realist conception of politics also resonated in another speech Bush directed toward the Congress. While addressing a public gathering in South Dakota in November 2002, President Bush demanded that Congressmen needed to be clear-eyed realists:

It’s important to have people in the Senate who are clear-eyed realists. It’s important to have people who see the world the way it is, not the way we hope it is. And the world is a dangerous place, particularly with people like Saddam Hussein in power. (Bush 2002c)

And some of the top-ranking people who manned his administration in the aftermath of the 2000 electoral victory were “clear-eyed realists,” including National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, among many others. The other prominent members of the administration were well-known neo-conservatives and the list of the most influential “neo-cons” would include Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz (now retired), Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, and Lewis Libby. The “neo-cons” have in one way

or another declared themselves as realists (Boyle 2004:84) and hence they can be labeled “neo-conservative realists.”

This powerful group of “neo-conservative realists” working within and extending control deep inside the Bush administration were already known for their hardened attitude toward regimes hostile to American interests and values. They carefully nurtured and still cherish the specific ideology of expanding the American core values worldwide buttressed by unparalleled American military power. This group of neo-conservative realists came together in 1997 through the creation of an organization called “Project for the New American Century” (PNAC). The major goals of PNAC are as follows: an increase in defense spending to support American global leadership, challenging regimes hostile to American values and interests, promotion of political and economic freedom worldwide, and the establishment of a global order that supports American security, prosperity, and principles (see PNAC website 1997).

An analysis of PNAC ideology would reveal that the core objective of the neo-conservative realists is to impose the American form of order on societies averse to American values and thus establish a global American empire. This objective marks a sharp distinction from academic realist theories that tell us that states focus on the balance of power and largely ignore ideological considerations. If the imposition of American order, according to the neo-conservative realists, requires fighting, then America would be ready to fight what one staunch supporter of the PNAC project calls the “savage war of peace” to expand the empire of liberty, democracy, and free market (Boot 2002). The Council on Foreign Relations’ report, *Iraq: The Day After*, published shortly before the invasion of Iraq, resonates a similar tone. And what is more appalling is that the report advocates “nation-building interventions.” Referring to the earlier apathy of the Bush administration to such interventions the report declares: “The partisan debate over nation-building is over. Administrations of both parties are clearly prepared to use American military forces to reform rogue states and repair broken societies” (Council on Foreign Relations 2003:48).

In brief, the neo-conservative realism rests on two principal elements: American exceptionalism, and the will to engage hostile regimes. The American notions of freedom and democracy that characterize the American political system constitute the very core of the powerful idea of American exceptionalism. The Founding Fathers of the American Federation envisioned a political mission with liberty and freedom as its rock-bottom ideals and believed that the system would make a difference for others. The belief in the uniqueness of the American political system soon led the Americans to believe that they were a distinctive nation and superior to all other nations on earth. In practical terms, it meant an American mission of promoting freedom and democratic rights throughout the world (Hassner 2002). The aspiration for continued freedom and the promotion of human rights demanded that the American frontier be expanded (Turner 1963), if required through the application of force. In fact, during the period from 1801 to 1904, America used force on 101 occasions in the name of liberating other peoples from the yoke of despotism (Cox 2003:9). Iraq is the latest example. During the period in which late President Ronald Reagan was in power (1980–1988), American international engagement became a pronounced foreign policy objective. President Reagan, who labeled the former U.S.S.R. as an “empire of evils,” had the least hesitation to challenge enemies militarily and also in terms of “wills and ideas” (Kaplan and Kristol 2003:64). The neo-conservative realists in the Bush administration have revived the Reagan-style international engagement in its full swing.

Quite a good number of domestic and international factors have facilitated the practical application of neo-conservative realism in Bush foreign policy. To be frank, the September 11, 2001, attack on America brought an unprecedented opportunity for the Bush administration to galvanize a national consensus to deal with the terrorists swiftly and effectively. The Democrats and the Republicans now share

a common view on foreign policy goals and priorities. Congressmen of both parties identified Al-Qaeda and Iraq as major foreign policy problems, passed war resolutions, and gave the president a blank cheque to use force against Al-Qaeda and Iraq and thus eliminate threats to American life and security. Although the Democrats criticize Bush for isolating the allies, they hardly dispute his attempts to order the world seen through the neo-conservative prism. This stands in sharp contrast to Congressional opposition to former President Bill Clinton's engagement initiatives in Bosnia (Boyle 2004:83). The neo-conservative realists have exploited the domestic consensus to promote a world order imbued with American values and under complete American management.

The neo-conservative foreign policy agenda was further facilitated by the demise of the global communist threats by the early 1990s. During the Cold War period, the presence of communist threat somewhat compelled America to keep its expansionist policies under control and a corollary of this position was the propagation of Republican promises—the promises of democracy, good government, and peaceful international community. It was impossible for the American leadership in the Cold War-dominated environment to undertake global expansionist designs and isolate the allies in Western Europe and elsewhere. This major obstacle was removed when the communist system suffered an immature death in 1991 and resulted in new opportunities for an expansionist drive. The September 11 attack signaled a historic opportunity for the neo-conservative realists to capitalize and embark on an expansionist design. The shift from the long American commitment to multilateralism to aggressive militarism to unilateralism became the cornerstone of American foreign policy in a quick succession of time (Agnew 2003:873).

The shift to a unilateralist position was, in fact, contemplated as early as the beginning of the 1990s, just after 2 years of the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Officials in the Defense Department became preoccupied with the plan of preventing the re-emergence of a rival state that might challenge American interest and position in global politics. The *New York Times* reported a leaked version of the plan on March 8, 1992: "Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat. . . . Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor" (*New York Times* 1992:14). This plan did not take any concrete shape during the two terms of former President Bill Clinton because the neo-conservatives were off the track of power and also there was no catastrophic attack on America. The event of September 11 signaled a different chapter, an opportune moment for a unilateralist turn. The neo-conservative realists in the Bush administration were ready to capitalize on the event to realize at least two objectives: (i) the declaration of a war on terror and the invasion of Iraq would serve as an eye-opener to any future challengers; and (ii) to re-impose American leadership on allies in Western Europe and East Asia even in the absence of a formidable communist threat. The war against Al-Qaeda terrorism got the allies to rally around the American flag but ruptures developed once the Bush administration decided to extend the war on terror to Iraq, against the regime of Saddam Hussein. But the neo-conservative obsession to invade Iraq had sent the message to allies that they could either bandwagon the United States or stay off and leave the United States to act alone.

A comparison between academic realist theories and neo-conservative realism would further clarify the differences in their basic arguments, outlooks, and approaches. The principal postulates of neo-conservative realism can be articulated in the following way:

- strengthen American defense to support American global leadership;
- national interest is a much more comprehensive concept than the realists think of it. The neo-conservative version of national interests comprises two

closely interlinked components—an increase in military capability as well as the spread of American values and institutions;

- expand the empire of liberty and freedom, democracy, and free market, if necessary by fighting a few savage wars of peace;
- effectively deal with, replace, or liquidate regimes or organizations hostile to American values and interests; and
- a belief in unilateralism and, by implication, a drift away from multilateralism that the realist theorists consider sympathetically.

The basic postulates of neo-conservative realism, as it is easily noticeable, tend to reject the most common features that characterize all varieties of realist theories outlined in the first section of this paper. Realist theories are most relevant when anarchic conditions more or less characterize the international system, the major and Great Powers are constantly involved in competition for power (a policy of power maximization), and power distributions in the system are skewed. Neo-conservative realists do not reject anarchy but tend to think more in terms of strengthening military power and American global leadership to promote American values and ideology. Another significant difference is that the realist theories are primarily preoccupied with ways and means of countering rival powers and they hardly bother about the diverse socioeconomic and political organizations of different societies; the neo-conservative realism is hostile to nondemocratic societies and non-American values.

Conclusion

The September 11, 2001, attack on the American heartland, so long well protected by the vast body of waters of the Atlantic and the Pacific, ushered in some fundamental changes in the global security environment. The new structure of threats defined as the combination of “technology and radicalism,” the categories of threat agents—mainly nonstate in nature and the identification of “rogue states” having connections to terrorist organizations, and allegedly developing weapons of mass destruction, are something new to the security planners worldwide. The realist theories command wide relevance to explain issues of wars and peace involving great and major powers. After the catastrophic attack of September 11, the changed nature of security environment, new nature of threats to global, or more specifically American security and the emergence of new threat agents have put the realist theories in an uncomfortable situation. It is not clear how the explanatory powers of the realist theories can fully account for such unique developments in the field. It seems quite relevant to argue that the two criteria, pointed out by Stephen Walt and reported in the introductory section of this paper, to judge any theory—the explanatory power of a theory to account for real-world events, and the theory’s internal fertility to refine and expand itself to explain anomalies—may not apply to the realist theories with regard to the war on terror and its extension to Iraq to replace the Saddam Hussein regime. It does not mean that realist theories are altogether irrelevant in the new context; rather, the objective is to report that the biggest anomaly of our time—the war on terror directed against a nonstate shadowy actor and then a weak nonthreatening state—is not amenable to a satisfactory explanation by realist theories. Walt’s second criterion—the theory’s internal fertility for refinement and expansion to grab new but irregular developments—arguably denies the realist theories a valid ground to expand and explain America’s war on terror.

The framework of neo-conservative realism, developed and expounded in this paper, arguably commands relevance to explain the anomaly. As mentioned before, neo-conservative realism combines both ideological and military aspects more smartly and is willing to fight new threats and pursue the new threat agents with the

avowed objectives of making America an unrivalled global leader and expanding the American empire of liberty, democracy, and free markets. Unlike academic realist theories, neo-conservative realism is not wholly tied down to some set principles of anarchic conditions and balance of power in the international system. Neo-conservative realism is wedded to any threat agent—state as well as nonstate; it is driven by a new version of national interest of strengthening military power and promoting liberty, democracy, and free markets, and its policy implementation depends more on unilateralist application of military force, less on support of allies and friends. The new approach to national interest and the application of military power put the neo-conservative realists in a more comfortable position to deal with all types of threats and challenges. The realists of diverse brands definitely lack this flexibility to modify instantly their theoretical frameworks and apply them to account for anomalies in international relations. To conclude, neo-conservative realism can explain America's current foreign policy behavior and the outgrowth of national security strategy more aptly.

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