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A Theoretical Perspective on the American Intervention in Iraq: 2003 ¹

In this paper I shall try to analyze the American intervention in Iraq in 2003 from the perspective of grand theories of international relations. More exactly I plan to see if what happened in spring 2003 with the intervention in Iraq could be explained as part of the realist theory or of the Wilsonian theory. The indicators that I plan to use in order to see if the intervention in Iraq was part of a realist or Wilsonian theory of international relations are represented by the use of the arguments for and against the war in Iraq- were these arguments part of the realist or part of the Wilsonian theory? In doing this I also plan to look at the changes of the emphasis on some arguments, which happened during the entire debate regarding intervention in Iraq- that heated sometime in July/August 2002 and lasted until the first day of the intervention- and to analyze why these changes occurred and how do these changes translate into changes of theory that happened inside the Bush Administration.

In looking at the realist theory I shall look at the defensive realism and at the offensive realism theories, and disregard the theory of human nature realism of Hans Morgenthau because I see no relevance for it in this study. The Wilsonian theory, or international liberalism, is usually characterized by the desire to spread democracy and freedom in the world and by the respect for a common set of rules set at that time under the aegis of the League of Nations. However, there is one link in this characterization, that misses and it will play an important role in my analysis of the US foreign policy theoretical framework. And that is the fact that Wilson acknowledged that US was a great power with a special mission, the Manifest Destiny of US "to serve as a beacon of liberty for the rest of

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the mankind”(Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p.46). Therefore Wilson’s view was that of spreading democracy and freedom through war and total victory, in the case of WWI.

In this analysis I plan to lay out the grand strategy that US during Bush Administration set for international relations and to see in what type of the above mentioned theories this could be explained. Then I shall analyze the arguments that were made by the US Administration for the war in Iraq, noticing the nuances used by the different institutions that make the foreign policy of the US. In this paper I shall not touch upon the war in itself because it is of no interest for our discussion the strategy used by the US troops in the intervention.

The grand international strategy of the Bush Administration after 9/11 is the one that is important to our study here and not the international strategy of the same Administration before 9/11. This strategy is best portrayed in the National Security Strategy of September 2002. Sentence one: “The United States possesses unprecedented-and unequalled-strength and influence in the world” (National Security Strategy, 2002). This sentence makes clear from the very beginning that the US is interested in power and there is no questioning of softening that power or letting it slip away from US hands: “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from surpassing or equaling the power of the United States”(National Security Strategy, 2002). “Power”, be it in the shape of military strength or political and economic world-wide influence, seems to be the key word. This would make us believe that we are dealing with a realist perspective of international relations based on the concept of power. However the Wilsonian perspective is not out of the picture yet.

The National Security Strategy has a number of problematic points where it is clear that from a theoretical point of view there are some tensions. The most important for our study is between the aims of defeating terrorism or any other potential adversaries and promoting democracy. “We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.”(National Security Strategy, p.3) The problem is that the first two sentences of this paragraph are about “defending” and “preserving” peace, and in the view of the US, the current status-quo, while the last sentence of the paragraph is about promoting values, thus changing the status-quo. This idea that preserving the status-quo and promoting values is the same thing, is mentioned often in the pages of this security paper. But the two ideas are not the same thing. For example some of the steps taken by US to maintain the status-quo, in fighting terrorists and tyrants (e.g.: cozying up to Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, for instance) conflict with

the aim of promoting freedom and democracy. A possible explanation for these differences has to do with the different strands that exist inside the Administration between the views of the foreign-policy makers, as Ivo Daalder of the Brookings Institution argues. These different strands are represented by the "democracy-promoting "imperialists" like Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Richard Pearle, Chairman of the Pentagon Advisory Board, and Douglas Feith, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, who want to change the world into a democratic empire led by United States; the "offensive realists" like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, who want to use the American power to prevent threats; and the "defensive realists" like Colin Powell, who still see a role for deterrence and for alliances with other countries." (The Economist, Sept. 28th 2002). And there is also Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, that is somewhere in between all these "camps". There is no distinguishable Rice world strategy, as there is a Powell one or a Rumsfeld one, but she seems to represent the classical view of Realpolitik, if we are to judge her by an article written in Foreign Affairs in 2000, where she argues for "building good relations among the great powers"(Foreign Affairs, 2000). The intriguing thing about Condoleezza Rice is that the realistic means mentioned above are used towards idealistic ends:" The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere". (Foreign Affairs, 2000)

Of course after presenting all these divisions inside the Bush Administration, with regard to the foreign-policy decision-makers, the obvious question would be if it makes any academic sense to present the large international strategy of the US and then to try to place the intervention in Iraq inside the larger international strategy that in its turn could be explained through a theory or a hybrid of theories of international relations. I argue that this path is worth to be taken by an academic approach because these exact divisions that exist inside the Administration on the larger international security strategy will make their presence felt in the arguments used during the debate for and against the US intervention in Iraq. Therefore understanding the theoretical differences that exist between the different strands of international policy inside the Bush Administration would provide answers for the differences that existed inside the Bush Administration regarding the intervention in Iraq, thus allowing us to place a theoretical label on this intervention. The conclusion on the grand strategy of international relations that US adopted after 9/11 could be that there are different competing strands inside the Administration. Seen through theoretical lenses, the strategy is a combination of different theories of international relations (offensive realism, defensive realism, classical realism or democracy-promoting imperialism). This is not totally a debate inside the realist camp, but rather one that has Wilsonianism attached to it, be it

rather through the arguments of the imperialist promotion of democracy, be it through the arguments of the defensive realists that argue for the need of using the international organizations. But one thing is common to all the above mentioned theories, and that is that in all these, the international organizations, in the particular case of Iraq, the United Nations, matter little if at all to the grand strategy of international relations. Only the "defense realists" would find a place for international organizations in their theory, but even there only as long as the organization would play as US wants it to play.

The debate about an intervention in Iraq existed for a long period of time since the end of the 1st Gulf War, during the entire 90s decade. There were some small scale interventions like Operation Desert Fox in December 1998, but the debate really heated in the summer of 2002. The main arguments for the intervention, that the Bush administration came up with during the entire debate from summer 2002 until March 2003 were: Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); the threat Saddam posed to the Middle East; Iraq's links to al Qaeda; Saddam's harsh treatment of the Iraqi people; Iraq's lack of democracy; and the example a free and democratic Iraq would set for authoritarian regimes in the region.

In an August, 26th 2002 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Dick Cheney launched the strongest arguments until then for an intervention in Iraq. He made it clear that the inspections alone will not do it and that disarmament has to be the desired goal regarding Iraq: "... Many have suggested that the problem can be dealt with simply by returning inspectors to Iraq. But we must remember that inspections are not an end in themselves. The objective has to be disarmament; to compel Iraqi compliance with the U.N. Security Council Resolutions that call for the complete destruction of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and an end to all efforts to develop or produce more chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons..." The entire argument was built on the threat that US and its allies will endure if Saddam Hussein is left to pursue weapons of mass destruction: "there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us." In the same line of argumentation, Donald Rumsfeld suggested at the end of July 2002, the "urgency of the threat and the futility of nonmilitary means of addressing it", and the fact that UN inspectors spent years "milling around the country[Iraq]"(New York Times, July 27th in Schmitt and James Dao article *"Air power Alone Can't Defeat Iraq, Rumsfeld Asserts"* & in New York Times, July 30th, in Patrick Tyler article, *Urgent Task for Rumsfeld*) and only knew where to look for secret weapons "when prompted by defectors". President [Bush](#), in a speech in Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 7, 2002, said, "[Iraq] possesses and produces

chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons.... Members of Congress of both political parties, and members of the United Nations Security Council, agree that Saddam Hussein is a threat to peace and must disarm. We agree that the Iraqi dictator must not be permitted to threaten America and the world with horrible poisons and diseases and gases and atomic weapons." This line of argumentation that Saddam is a threat to the US and to the interests of the US in the region lasted quite a long period of time and it was the main argument used in this debate about the intervention in Iraq. However it is significant to mention that Cheney and Rumsfeld during July and August speeches made it clear that a nonmilitary solution for the threat that Saddam poses and UN inspections will not get the desired result.

What is the theory behind this line of argumentation? I would say that here we have an example of "offensive realism" of the type that Mearsheimer coined in the field of international relations theory. Rumsfeld and Cheney are more concerned with the threat that Iraq poses to US's power and influence in the region and at the global level. Seeking more power is the key to survival in a world where no international organization could protect the state. The offensive realists believe that more and more power would mean more and more security and would alleviate further threats. An intervention against a rival that looks weak at that moment in time and "to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs"(Mearsheimer, p.21) a characteristic of offensive realism fits the character of the Iraqi intervention. For offensive realists, "a state's ultimate goal is to be the hegemon of the system." (Mearsheimer, p.21) Rumsfeld and Cheney's arguments follow this theoretical type: they both distrust international organizations, they both focus on the possible threat that Iraq would pose at a latter stage if left unchecked and they both argue for the fact that a nonmilitary course would prove futile (more exactly that only war would solve the problem). If US intervene in Iraq and put its own regime in place there, then US would have a puppet (an oil-rich and powerful one) in the Middle East, therefore increasing US power in the region.

However US did not go to war in July/August 2002, but rather went to the United Nations and the arguments that Bush made in front of the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 12, 2002, He framed the arguments against Iraq in the veil of the fact that Saddam Hussein did not respect the resolutions of the Security Council and asked the UN to raise up to its duty and not to become a toothless institution, like the League of Nations: "All the world now faces a test and the United Nations a difficult and defining moment.[...] UN must face it up to its founding purpose"(Bush Address to the UN, 2002). In an interview on Sept.13th, Bush said that it was "highly doubtful" that Saddam Hussein

would meet United Nations demands to disarm, and that the US officials would seek a UN resolution that would allow for US troops to use force if Iraq did not comply with the demands of the UN. (New York Times, September 14, "Bush is doubtful Iraq will comply with UN demands" by David Sanger). What does this change in the method of the argumentation mean? Rumsfeld and Cheney advocated for not using international organizations and UN inspectors, but Bush makes a statement at the UN, deciding to go through the United Nations. Most of the people considered this to be a victory of the Powellites inside the Administration, that advocate for an international approach of the problem, though United Nations and in close consultations with the allies of the UN in the Middle East and on the world stage. However the distrust that Bush seems to show in the UN only days after that speech and the fact that the only acceptable solution coming from the UN would be that of a resolution authorizing US intervention in Iraq, if Iraq does not comply with the UN demands, could indicate that US never took the possibility of not going to war seriously. It was about how they would go to war: through an international organization and with the blessing of the Security Council or alone, without using an international organization. From a theoretical perspective the fact that President Bush listened to the defensive realism of Colin Powell and decided to use the international organizations and the alliances to get the desired results. It seems odd to place defensive realism next to international organizations, and I have to admit that it does not respect *ad litteram* the theory put forward by Kenneth Waltz. The major point of Kenneth Waltz' s theory is that "the first concern of states is to maintain their position in the system" (Waltz, p.126). This translates in the desire of states to acquire power in order to maintain their position. The departure point between offensive and defensive realists is the amount of power that states want to acquire. While the offensive realists consider that the states want as much power as possible, thus changing the existing status-quo, the defensive realists, consider that states are interested in preserving power and preserving the existing balance of power, rather than increasing it. The defensive realists are interested in preserving the status-quo. The fact that Powell makes use of international institutions and alliances is nothing more than the use of the status-quo situation, where US does not want to increase its power, but rather wants to preserve it. It wants to preserve the power it has and therefore in dealing with the other great powers regarding the issue of Iraq, goes to the UN to show that it takes their opinions into account and that it uses the same patterns of solving international problems as before. The "Powell Doctrine" is one of avoiding military involvement unless firm public support, overwhelming force, a definable mission and a clear exit strategy are in place. The fact that they use the UN in their planning is meant to gather

public support, both on the international and domestic levels and to put a stop to the people desiring immediate military involvement. I am certain that the UN is not used in the way the international liberalists want it to be used, as using a common set of values and as certifying the existence of an international law that has to be respected by all states. It has been made clear, by Mr. Powell himself that if UN would not give US what it wants (i.e.: military intervention) then the US would go it alone, if need be. As evidence will show, the UN is used, but the results it produces are not trusted and even when the inspector's team led by Mr. Hans Blix comes up with no evidence of weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq, the US still pursues its goal: intervention in Iraq.

A second argument used in the debate with Iraq, was to prove that there is a link between the terrorists of 9/11 and the Iraqi leadership. In a speech on January 30, 2003, Cheney said that Saddam's regime "aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda. [Saddam] could decide secretly to provide weapons of mass destruction to terrorists for use against us." In his U.N. speech, Powell said: "Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda operatives.... Al Qaeda affiliates based in Baghdad now coordinate the movement of people, money, and supplies into and throughout Iraq for his network, and they have now been operating freely in the capital for more than eight months." Other administration officials, including National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, talked frequently about Saddam's links to al Qaeda. This argument seems to be used mainly to gather American public support. In September 2003, a poll taken by Washington Post showed that more than 70% of the Americans thought that Saddam was involved in the attacks on 9/11. Therefore it makes sense that in their desire to touch their goals, the Bush Administration would use every bullet of argumentation that they have. Of course the UN was considered incapable of acting against terrorist organizations allied with states and they were sidetracked again by the US. The usage of this argument is in the same line of theories as the ones mentioned above, where we are speaking of a threat to the position of the US in the world (the defensive realists) or of an opportunity to get rid of a tyrant that could at some moment in time pose a threat by involving it into an already existing war against terrorism (the offensive realists).

The third and fourth major arguments go together. They are the liberation and democratization of Iraq arguments as well as the argument that a domino effect would happen all throughout the Arab world, obliging the Arab states to turn towards democracy, because they will be inspired by Iraq and what happened to Iraq. In his February speech, Bush said, "A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of

freedom for other nations in the region.... Success in Iraq could also begin a new stage for Middle Eastern peace, and set in motion progress towards a fully democratic Palestinian state." This is the argument run by people like Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Pearle. They are considered to be the "democracy-promoting imperialists". They try to make use of the resources of the United States in order to promote democracy, liberal American style democracy, all over the world, in a belief that this would bring more security to the United States. They do not want to use international organizations either (UN in this case) , considering that the United Nations' initial goals were perverted and tyrants or dictators stand next to democratically elected people in the United Nations General Assembly. Wolfowitz is considered to be the "brain" behind the entire foreign policy of the United States.

However for a long period of time in the debate the intervention in Iraq was done not to liberate the Iraqi people but to disarm Saddam. Even though Bush made reference, even as early as October 2002, to a desire to bring democracy to Iraq, "America believes that all people are entitled to hope and human rights, to the non-negotiable demands of human dignity...America is a friend to the people of Iraq. Our demands are directed only at the regime that enslaves them and threatens us.... The long captivity of Iraq will end, and an era of new hope will begin." , the main argument run until the debates surrounding the second UN Resolution asking for approval for a US intervention in Iraq was that Saddam posed a threat to the world community because of the weapons of mass destruction that he held. On February 26, 2003 in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute Bush said, "The first to benefit from a free Iraq would be the Iraqi people themselves. Today they live in scarcity and fear, under a dictator who has brought them nothing but war, and misery, and torture. Their lives and their freedom matter little to Saddam Hussein--but Iraqi lives and freedom matter greatly to us." On December 2nd, 2002, in a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, Paul Wolfowitz considered that "The peaceful implementation of Resolution 1441 can only happen if there is a fundamental change in the attitude of the Iraqi regime." This is just a glimpse of the ideas of Wolfowitz, of which we could get an inside by reading his article "Statesmanship in the New Century", where he puts forward four objectives for the foreign policies of the US: "1. strengthen the democratic free market consensus; 2. maintain and strengthen the alliance structure of the liberal democracies states; 3. deal effectively with rogue states and minor disturbers in the international order" (he singles out Iraq in this case); 4. Maintain the US leadership role, including its military pre-eminence. This is a necessary underpinning of the global democratic consensus."(Wolfowitz, p.333-334) It is clear from these statements that

Wolfowitz sees as more important a regime change than the disarmament of Iraq. Wolfowitz is more interested in enlarging the number of liberal democracies than of dealing with dictators like Saddam. Analyzing Wolfowitz's policy from a theoretical perspective, I would say that it is in some ways a continuation of the political change in the foreign policy of the US brought about by Woodrow Wilson. I know that many might be shocked by this association, but what else is this desire to promote democracy all over the world, through the use of weapons if need be, but a continuation of the same line of argumentation that Woodrow Wilson used : " But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have carried nearest our hearts-for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations[...] To such a task we dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace she has treasured".(Rostow, p.206)? By using this argument Wilson was the first one that blurred the lines between domestic and foreign policy for the United States, and basically considered that everything that happened in the world had to do with the US because US was the defender and the promoter of democracy. It is true that there is a clear departure from Wilsonianism in Wolfowitz's theory, when he totally disregards the international organization and he does not take into consideration any attempt to promote democracy through the use of United Nations or other international bodies. The democracy-promoting imperialism, was considered by Walter Russel Mead as "Wilsonianism on the right", or as Joseph Nye coins it as neo-Wilsonianism.

I consider this theory of "democracy-promoting imperialism" to be a theory that attempts to change the status-quo. It tries to change the system of great powers of international relations by bringing in a system of democracies. An empire of democracies, with the capital in Washington, in the capital of the greatest defender of democracy. Compared to defensive realism and offensive realism the differences are interesting to be noticed. While for democracy-promoting imperialists it clearly matters what type of regime we have in a given state, for the defensive and offensive realists it does not matter. For the defensive realists it is important to maintain the status-quo, while for the offensive realists and for the democracy-promoting imperialists the status-quo has to change. But there are differences between these two, too. While the offensive realists argue that the desire of every state is to become a hegemon of the international system, the democracy-promoting imperialists, argue that more benefits could be drawn from installing an empire of

democracies, on the same pattern of an empire of civilizations that the Roman empire was built upon. There is a clear difference between hegemonic and imperialistic powers, and the main feature of it is the amount of domination of the system in which they operate, with the imperialist power totally dominating this system and the hegemonic power being the most important and powerful actor of the system. Another interesting difference that it is worth to be mentioned is the fact that defensive and offensive realists believe that it is the system of international relations the reason why states want more and more power. But the democracy-promoting imperialists see it as the Manifest Destiny of the US, the chosen City on the Hill, to share with the entire world the fruits of having democracy and liberty. Therefore for the latter it is inherent in their nature as Americans to promote democracy even by using weapons and making war.

In these debates there is also the view of Condoleezza Rice, that argues for the primacy of "U.S. interests, which are served by having strong alliances, can be promoted within the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, as well as through well-crafted international agreements" (Hoover Digest 2000, no.2). She gives us a glimpse of her view of how the foreign policy of the Bush Administration should be run: "Foreign policy in the next administration should most certainly be internationalist. But it must also proceed from the firm ground of the national interest, not from the interests of an illusory international community. America can exercise power without arrogance and pursue its interests without hectoring and bluster." (Hoover Digest 2000, no.2) She still sees a role for deterrence in dealing with rogue states: "Rather, the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire weapons of mass destruction, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration." (Hoover Digest 2000, no.2) Condoleezza Rice is in the same boat as the "defensive realists" like Powell, but there are differences. Her approach seems to be more oriented towards great power politics and Realpolitik of the 19th century kind. She seems to be closer to people like Brent Scowcroft and the Cold War classical realists than of defensive realists like Powell. In any case "Condoleezza Rice is absolutely the key swing vote apart from Bush himself [in the Bush Administration]," as neoconservative publisher William Kristol said. (Washington Post, May 14th , 2002)

There is another line of argumentation that developed towards the end of the diplomatic debate and the beginning of the War in late February/ early March 2003. That line of argumentation was used mainly by the defensive realists in their last try to gather world support. The argument run like this: US does not need a new approval from the UN because it already has an approval from Security Council Resolution 687 to enforce this

resolution if Iraq shall not accept unconditionally, under international supervision, the "destruction, removal or rendering harmless" (UNSC Res.687-1991) of its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles with a range over 150 kilometers. This new line of argumentation is one that wants to show that the US is only putting teeth in the UN Resolutions and it is actually respecting them and not breaking them. This line of argumentation, even though used by scholars like Anne-Marie Slaughter, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and Alexander Haig, former Secretary of State since August/September 2002, was not used by Administration officials until February/March 2003. This argument tries to maintain the status-quo, by saving whatever it is left to save from the United Nations. Those that put it forward consider UN to be an important piece of the international system and more significantly of the status-quo. This line of argumentation came from the Powellites in the Administration, the defensive realists.

So, after all this talk, was the American intervention in Iraq from a theoretical perspective a realist hyperpower policy or a Wilsonian side-effect? As I guess you noticed the answer does not come easy, because we are dealing with a complex theoretical framework and a clash of theories with many of the theories involved being new interpretations of older theories. I would argue that it was a bit of everything, with each theory having its 15' spotlight in the debate about the intervention and each theory gathering support from different corners. All the above mentioned theories were used in the debate. The discussion is not which one was used but how much of one or another theory was used. In this respect I would say that the offensive realists and the democracy-promoting imperialists won the debate with the defensive realists. Why? First of all the war in Iraq happened and there was a status-quo change in the international relations (the role of the US, of the UN, the alliances between US and its allies, the relations between Central and Eastern European countries and the EU, the relations inside the EU were all put into question). The arguments of the democracy-promoting imperialists like Wolfowitz and of the offensive realists, that want to use US power to get rid of threats, like Cheney and Rumsfeld, were the ones that won the debate inside the Bush Administration, while the defensive realists desire to go through the UN did not materialize.

When speaking about the role of Wilsonianism in this whole debate, we are actually speaking of the role of neo-Wilsonianism, or "Wilsonianism of the right", promoted by the democracy-promoting imperialists like Wolfowitz. In this sense the theoretical backbone of the intervention was a coalition between offensive realists and new-Wilsonites. The former see the danger laying the weapons of mass destruction of the enemy, while the latter see

the danger laying in the characteristics of the regime of the enemy, which is not democratic. It is an interesting combination, that does not work all the time (for example in the case of a dictator that cannot threaten the US, the debate will be between the foreign policy representatives of these two competing theories). However in the case of the intervention in Iraq this combination worked.

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