

**[Preliminary draft]**

**Title of the paper:**

**Beyond the Realist Theories: 'Neo-conservative Realism' and  
the American Invasion of Iraq**

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Paper presented at the 2005 Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) annual  
conference held in London, Ontario, June 2-4.

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## **Beyond the Realist Theories: 'Neo-conservative Realism' and the American Invasion of Iraq**

Stephen M. Walt, a noted American realist, writing some three 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 (for example, Kegley, 1993, 1995; Lebow, 1994; Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994; Rosecrance and Stein, 1993; and 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 would 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 remain 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 centre stage of international politics and dominate political and military decisions of the most powerful state. One such anomaly has been the American 'War on terror' launched against al-Qaeda in the wake of the 9/11 attack and its subsequent extension to Iraq. Indeed, the American war against and 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 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, 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 9/11 attack on America and its 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 non-state 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 actual motives 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 non-state actor, and Iraq. It argues that academic realist theories are largely deficit frameworks to provide a satisfactory explanation of America's war against a concept, the non-state transnational network of Islamic fundamentalists known as al-Qaeda. The changed nature of threats posed by al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations and the departure of the Bush administration from the traditional concepts of deterrence and containment that worked well during the Cold War period have created real dilemmas for the realist theorists. This paper proposes a new theoretical framework – the theory of 'neo-conservative realism' – to cover up the apparent weaknesses of existing realist theories to consider America's war against non-state shadowy organization al-Qaeda, and its war move against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. In an attempt to establish this argument, the 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 American war against al-Qaeda and the invasion of Iraq. In the final part, the paper develops the proposed framework of neo-conservative realism to account for the Bush administration's decisions to 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, treats nation-states as the primary constituent units in that system and promotes 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 one 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 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, particularly E.H. Carr (1946) and Hans J. Morgenthau (1948), emphasized the anarchic nature of the international system and human aggressiveness as prime causes of war. 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, revisionist goals of certain states and the absence of morality in foreign policy. In brief, the gloomy human nature and lawlessness in the international system create 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. Historical evidence in Europe and elsewhere testify that states faced with dangers of war tend to form balances of power to deter war.

The preoccupation with anarchic conditions in the international system and human aggressiveness soon generated widespread dissatisfaction with the classical realist theory of international relations. Critics were quick to point out that the theory deemphasized positive interactions and cooperative designs between states, overlooked growing interdependence in the international system and the gradual development of international legal norms to govern and regulate 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.

Kenneth Waltz, like the classical realists, also accepts anarchic conditions as an autonomous causal force in the international system and treats states as the basic units of the system. He prefers to locate the pattern of actions/reactions of states within the systemic context. The systemic anarchic conditions, according to him, create 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). 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. Since 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 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 post-structuralist scholars. Many scholars of the realist camp (particularly Buzan, Jones, and Little, 1993) accuse Waltz of being immune to change in the international system; the liberal scholars find his emphasis on anarchy and systemic determinants historically inaccurate (Ruggie, 1983; Schroeder 1994) while the post structuralists interpret his theory as an attempt to legitimate a dangerous discourse of power politics (for example, Ashley, 1984). The criticisms have encouraged many other realist scholars to further improve and build on Waltz's theory of structural realism or simply neo-realism. Stephen Walt (2002: 204-210) classifies and characterizes the new generation of structuralist or neo-realist scholars into two broad camps – the defensive realists and the offensive realists.

Defensive realists (Glaser, 1994-95; Lynn-Jones, 1995; Snyder, 1991; Van Evera, 1984; Walt, 1989) 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 on 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. 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). Briefly speaking, defensive realists support policies to promote the status quo and view aggressive wars as inconsistent with 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 (Copeland, 2000; Labs, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001; Zakaria, 1998) 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 accurately figure out the real intentions of other states that might undertake aggressive designs in the future. The inability to know each other’s intentions forces 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 hegemon, may not fight each other directly, 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 post-war period is a case at hand.

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 in 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;
- 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 revolve around the concept of 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 non-state actor, a transnational organization representing some radical objectives. Similarly, the war between the most powerful state and one of the weakest and most vulnerable states at a given point of time did not catch any serious realist attention either. The next section analyses 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 hand.

## Applying the Realist Theories to the War on al-Qaeda and 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, D.C. 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 on terror 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 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.

Another notable feature of the *National Security strategy 2002* is its repudiation of the Cold War concepts of deterrence and containment. It 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). 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 repudiation of traditional deterrence theory are something new within the parlor of security studies. Another important point outlined in the *National Security Strategy 2002* is a dangerous threat to the sovereign equality of nation-states. 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 (Mandelbaum, 2002; Brooks and Wohlforth, 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 weapons of mass destruction. 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 11<sup>th</sup>, Saddam Hussein's regime gleefully celebrated the terrorist attacks on America (Bush, 2002b).

The charge against Iraq's alleged WMD programs was more serious. Actions were necessary not only to save the allies in the Middle East – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey but also to ensure security of American servicemen stationed in different Middle Eastern countries. 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 did come out successful to establish any linkage between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein or find 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 to Japan and the European Union, America still tops the list of nations of the world in terms 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 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 per cent of world product and their economy is still 40 per cent bigger 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, on the contrary, predicts that great powers may undertake opportunistic aggressions if conquests are deemed to produce benefits for the conquerors. The classical realists clearly state that anarchic conditions and human aggressiveness 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 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 little 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 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. 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 post-invasion consequences and criticized the Democratic Party for its failure to scrutinize the war aims of the Republican president (Kaufman, 2002).

The growing unease of the realists with the invasion and occupation of Iraq also 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 can be defined as a parochial realist approach to promote narrow national interests and security conceived and nurtured by a small section of elites, can better explain how the Bush administration planned and executed the invasion of Iraq unilaterally defying 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, is well premised on the concepts of national interest and maximization of military power but view them in a different way. National interest, the neo-conservative realists would define, stands for an expansion of the American empire of liberty, democracy and free market, and the purpose of military power is to

prop up the empire of liberty and freedom by challenging and eliminating anti-American regimes and organizations.

### **‘Neo-conservative Realism’ and the Iraq Invasion**

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, in a major foreign policy speech, projected the image of a president as ‘a clear-eyed realist’ (Bush, 1999). This realist conception of politics also resonated another speech Bush directed towards 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 Condoleeza Rice, and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, among others. The other prominent members of the administration were well-known neo-conservatives and the list of the most influential ‘neo-cons’ 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 towards 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 realist forces came together in 1997 through the creation of an organization called 'Project for the New American Century' (PNAC). The major goals of PNAC are: 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, 2002).

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. If the imposition of American order 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 rouge 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 the system would make a difference from 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, 1893), 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 late President Ronald Reagan was in power (1980-1988) American international engagement became a pronounced foreign policy objective. President Reagan, who labeled the former USSR 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 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 foe 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 outcome 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 9/11 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 became the cornerstone of American foreign policy in a quick succession of time (Agnew, 2003: 873).

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 neoconservative realism can be articulated the following way:

- Strengthen American defense to support American global leadership;
- 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.

The basic postulates of neo-conservative realism, as it is easily noticeable, tend to reject the most common characteristic features that permeate 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 realism, in contrast, is premised on a different set of postulates; other than the narrowly defined concept of national interest and the policy of power maximization to prop up a particular pattern of American global leadership there is little common between academic realism and neo-conservative realism. Invasions and conquests, viewed from the neo-conservative realist perspective, can be undertaken even in peaceful international situation, anarchic conditions are not a requirement.

Equally noticeable is the fact that while realist theories are more grounded in anarchy and the acquisition of power, particularly the military dimension of power, the neo-conservative realism combines both military and ideological elements to promote narrowly conceived interest – the promotion of liberty and freedom, democracy and free markets worldwide supported by an intimidating military muscle. Another significant difference is that the realist theories are primarily preoccupied with idea of countering rival powers and they hardly bother about the diverse socio-economic and political organizations of different societies; the neo-conservative realism is hostile to non-democratic societies and non-American values.

To sum up, the prism of the realist theories at best permits a flimsy overview of the American invasion of Iraq and the underlying dynamism of the invasion largely remains outside its purview. Neo-conservative realism is theoretically more comfortable and better equipped to make an inroad into the very dynamism of this historic event and satisfy the queries of academic international relations community.

## **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 non-state 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. Till the execution of the September 11 catastrophic attack, the realist theories commanded wide relevance to explain issues of wars and peace involving great and major powers. 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 hostile to American interests and values. 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 non-state actor and then a weak non-threatening 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 irregular developments – arguably denies the realist theories a valid ground to expand and explain America’s war on terror.

The theoretical framework of neo-conservative realism, developed and expounded in this paper, commands more 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 expanding the American empire of liberty, democracy and free markets. Unlike academic realist theories, neo-conservative realism is not tied down to some set principles of anarchic conditions in the international system, the primacy of states in the arena of global politics, and competition for powers between great and major powers that might provoke wars. Neo-conservative realism is wedded to any threat agents – state as well as non-state, it is driven by a new version of national interest of promoting liberty, democracy and free markets, and its policy implementation depends more on 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 dangers. The realists of diverse brands definitely lack this freedom to instantly modify their theoretical frameworks and apply them to account for anomalies in international relations.

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