

# Applying Bargaining Theory to 2003 Iraq War<sup>1</sup>

POLISCI 101: Introduction to International Relations

**Motivation:** Because war is costly, there should be a bargain that both sides in a dispute would prefer to war. But states are sometimes unable to agree to this mutually preferable bargain, like the United States and Iraq failed to do in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War. Let's take primary rationalist explanations for war and apply them to the 2003 Iraq War!

## Background Information: 2003 Iraq War



Following the Gulf War, which the United States won within 100 hours of launching its ground campaign, the United States enacted a policy of containment. This containment policy sought to limit Saddam Hussein's ability to threaten regional stability (in particular, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia). It relied heavily on economic sanctions, no-fly zones to protect the Kurds, and the stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia. It also required UNSCOM inspectors to make sure Iraq was dismantling its weapons program. Throughout the 90s and into the new millennia, this policy of containment continued to fray. Enforcement of the no-fly zones required constant patrolling and led to frequent clashes. U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia created political grievances for radical militants like Usama bin Laden. The economic sanctions the United States and allies imposed placed enormous costs

on the Iraqi people, but not Hussein's regime itself. The UNSCOM inspectors were continually harassed and unable to confirm disarmament. Finally, overall support in the United Nations Security Council for this containment policy was weakening.

The Clinton Administration had considered pursuing forcible regime change in Iraq. However, it ultimately decided against it because the Department of Defense believed that regime change would undermine regional stability by creating fragmentations among religious and ethnic lines, causing chaos by their competition for power.

However, following 9/11, the Bush Administration decided in favor of forcible regime change with many suggesting that the war would not be that costly. The reasons that the Bush Administration gave several reasons for this decision. First, they argued that Saddam Hussein was supporting Al Qaeda, and they also alleged that Hussein was trying to develop nuclear weapons. The Bush administration also claimed that Hussein was likely to launch a chemical or biological weapons attack. In fact, President Bush was publicly vaccinated for small pox to illustrate how seriously the administration was taking this possibility. Finally, it's also plausible

<sup>1</sup> Lindsay Hundley (2018). Please do not circulate without author's permission.

that the Bush administration sought to secure oil supplies from the Middle East, and the administration's neoconservative ideology suggested that installing a democratic regime in the Middle East would decrease conflict in the region.

### **Evaluating Explanations of the Iraq War**

1. Considering that one of the demands the United States made was the Saddam Hussein step down from power, do you think there was a bargain that both sides would have preferred to war? Why or Why not?
2. Do you think private information contribute to the outbreak of the Iraq War? If so, what was the private information? Do you think there was a high degree of uncertainty over which side would win the war? Why or why not?
3. According to the bargaining model, why weren't the participants able to credibly reveal that information?
4. What other factors does Lake (2010) identify as contributing to the informational that led to war?
5. Do you think that a commitment problem contributed to the outbreak of the Iraq War? Explain why or why not.