

## **IR Theory in Practice Case Study: The Gulf War, 1990-1991**

### **Section 1**

#### **Realist IR Theory and the Gulf War**

*From reading Chapter 5 of The Globalization of World Politics (4e.), you should now be familiar with the basic tenets of Realist International Relations (IR) theory. You are advised to consult this crucial chapter if you have not done so already, as its contents will not be repeated here. Where you see bracketed chapter references, for example (see ch.4), this refers to the relevant chapter in The Globalization of World Politics (4e.).*

#### **Introduction**

There are many ways in which Operation Desert Storm, the military action to repel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, fits into traditional Realist accounts of war. In addition to reading this section, however, you should consult the Liberalism, Marxism, Constructivist, and Alternative Theory sections of the case study for important alternatives to Realism. The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 5 of *The Globalization of World Politics* (4e.) illustrate important aspects of the first Gulf War from a Realist perspective. We will briefly focus on 1) US geo-strategic dominance in the post-Cold War era; 2) the protection of Western oil interests; and 3) the enduring reality of military power. As with the previous section, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways Realist IR theory might help you think about the 1990-91 Gulf War and its aftermath.

#### **1) US Dominance and Balance of Power**

Though the Soviet Union had not yet collapsed by the time Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the Cold War was already viewed as over (see ch.3-4). Though debates over who won or lost the Cold War would inevitably ensue, it was clear to many that the United States had emerged from the confrontation as the so-called "leader of the free world" and sole remaining superpower.

Iraq invaded Kuwait after a long argument over the price of oil and outstanding war debts. In realist terms, since US interest lay in preventing any one power from dominating the Gulf region, and Iraq's expansionist actions threatened to upset the regional balance of power. (In the past, the US had allied itself with Iraq against Iran in order to maintain that balance, a history that, among other factors, may have convinced Baghdad that the George H.W. Bush administration would not militarily oppose its actions.) Realist theory also holds that sovereignty is one of the basic principles of international order, and Iraq's disregard for Kuwait's sovereignty posed a challenge to one of the ordering principles of the international system.

The United States, however, delivered an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein (via UN Resolutions 660 and 678) to withdraw before 15 January 1991. When Iraq's forces did not comply, a land offensive (Operation Desert Storm) was initiated on 24 February 1991. Led

by the United States, it was backed twenty-eight other states marshalled under a UN mandate. Within three days, what was reputed at the time to be the fourth-largest standing army in the world had been pushed back behind the Iraq-Kuwait border, and Saddam Hussein unconditionally accepted the UN Resolutions. What Saddam had billed as the "Mother of All Battles" ended in his utter military defeat (though he was not yet to be removed from power by the United States) and the restoration of Kuwaiti sovereignty.

Writing at the time, Michael Kinsley suggested that, "to justify American actions in the Persian Gulf, President Bush cannot call upon the usual rhetoric about democracy and freedom. Instead, the reigning concept is 'order'." (Kinsley, 1991: 221). The United States demonstrated that it would not tolerate open defiance of its demands, threats to its interests in political stability and the continuous supply of oil from the Gulf (see section 2), or broader attempts to overturn the US-led 'international order.' As the dominant power in the international system, the US would act to protect the stability of the system, and thereby ensure perpetuation of its own pre-eminence. The Gulf War demonstrated both America's dominance of the international system and its resulting relative freedom in enforcing its interests, consistent with the tenets of Realist IR theory.

## 2) Western Oil Interests

Realists can straightforwardly account for the decision of the US-led coalition to repel Iraqi forces from Kuwait in terms of the price of oil and who controls it. Iraq, had it successfully annexed Kuwait, would not only have reclaimed territory but would have controlled 20% of the world's reserves of oil, the most significant commodity in the industrialized world, and would probably have dominated the decision-making of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Analysts feared that Iraq could have bullied Saudi Arabia into a damaging oil price hike and caused catastrophic economic recessions in the industrialized North. According to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, "both the right-makes-right arguments and those of national sovereignty are really, at best, more palatable ways of saying that the United States interests in the Persian Gulf is primarily economic" (Friedman 1991: 206).

### Box 1.1: Thomas L. Friedman

The United States has not sent troops to the Saudi desert to preserve democratic principles. The Saudi monarchy is a feudal regime that does not even allow women to drive cars. Surely it is not American policy to make the world safe for feudalism. This is about money, about protecting governments loyal to America and punishing those that are not and about who will set the price of oil... [T]he interest at stake may be, in short, to make the world safe for gas guzzlers

*Thomas L. Friedman, 'Washington's "Vital Interests"', p.203, 206.*

Realists believe that powerful states are able to shape the international political economy in ways favourable to them (Krasner, 1976, 1978). Iraq, therefore, represented the exercise of state power by the most powerful state and its allies to protect their economic interests. However, since Realists have traditionally focused on military power as the defining attribute of state power and interest, focusing on the economic interests behind

US intervention does diminish *Realpolitik* to a limited extent. (For example, is it problematic for Realist theory that, although the US provided the military muscle, it was Japan who bankrolled the UN-coalition?) This brings us to our next point about Realist theory and the Gulf War.

### 3) Military Power Still Dominates

In much of Realist literature on international relations, military force remains the most important measure of assessing state strength. Although great powers must excel across a range of capabilities, the Realist tradition places military force at the top of the hierarchy. Clearly the swiftness of the US-led coalition's defeat of Iraq points to the continuing relevance of this insight. Some in the American foreign policy establishment believed that the United States had developed a harmful aversion to the use of force after its involvement in Vietnam (the so-called "Vietnam syndrome"), and that the Gulf War would shift the country toward a more forceful defence of its international interests. These included the military limitation of Iraq's capacity to threaten its neighbours and international order (as discussed in Section 1).

#### Box 1.2

The Persian Gulf War - would anyone now call it the war to liberate Kuwait? - was not a war to end war. It was a war to end a syndrome, to renew us for more war. Inclined by habit toward war, we had been stopped, stunned by the trauma of seeing ourselves as we prosecuted low-intensity war against Vietnam.

*Thomas Dumm, United States, p.178.*

#### Box 1.3: Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction in 1991

As I report to you, air attacks are under way against military targets in Iraq. We are determined to knock out Saddam Hussein's nuclear bomb potential. We will also destroy his chemical weapons facilities. Much of Saddam's artillery and tanks will be destroyed. Our operations are designed to best protect the lives of all the coalition forces by targeting Saddam's vast military arsenal.

*George Bush, 'The Liberation of Kuwait Has Begun', Speech of January 16, 1991, p.312*

The Gulf War, however, also showed some of the limitations of traditional Realist frameworks for assessing military force. Consider deterrence and compellence theory. Deterrence is the threat of the use of force to prevent someone doing something they would otherwise do. Compellence is the threat of the use of force to make someone do something they would otherwise *not* do. Despite its overwhelming military power, the United States was unable either to deter Iraq from invading Kuwait, nor compel it to withdraw without initiating military action (Herring 1995). Conversely, Iraq could not deter an attack by US and allied forces despite its status as the fourth-largest military in the world and possession of chemical weapons.

At the end of the Cold War, scholars have debated whether the influence of military power in international relations is waning, as economically significant powers such as Germany and Japan exercise considerable political influence despite their relative military weakness. By now you should be familiar with the factors many claimed led to a decline in the effectiveness of military power in the era of 'globalization': greater interdependence (which reduces the incentives to use force), increasing estimates of the cost of war (both financially and in terms of destructiveness), an acute sensitivity to casualties, the restraining qualities of nuclear weapons, and the spread of liberal democracy. Realism's critics highlight these factors; traditional state-centric and overly militarized world-views are inadequate. Although the Gulf War appeared to uphold the Realist belief in the importance of military power, at least temporarily, it also revealed some of its weaknesses.