IR theory in Practice Case Study: The Gulf War, 1990-1991

Section 2

Liberal IR Theory and the Gulf War

From reading Chapter 6 of The Globalization of World Politics (4e.), *you should now be familiar with the basic tenets of Liberal 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

The previous section of this case study examined the Realist claims through which the 1990-91 Gulf War can be viewed. There are many ways, however, in which Operation Desert Storm and its aftermath provide support for Liberal IR theory. In addition to this section, you should consult the Marxism and Reflectivist/Constructivist sections of the case study for important alternatives to Liberalism and Realism. The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 6 of *The Globalization of World Politics* (4e.) illustrate important aspects of the Gulf War from a Liberal perspective.

Like realism, there is no definitive liberal IR theory. As suggested in the previous case study, Liberalism derives from a set of broad assumptions that diverge from Realism concerning the greater number of relevant actors in world politics, the impact of institutions and domestic society, and liberal ideas concerning the power of human rights. In the context of the crisis in the Gulf we will briefly focus on 1) the concept of a 'New World Order' after the Cold War; 2) the importance of multilateralism when undertaking military action; and 3) the creation of a safe 'humanitarian' area for the Kurds. As with the previous section, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways Liberal international theory might help you think about the 1990-91 Gulf War and its aftermath.

1) The New World Order

The words of US President George H.W. Bush on January 16, 1991, two hours after the "liberation of Kuwait" had commenced, were the language of liberalism – emphasizing a new world characterized by the principles of international law, the UN, and peacekeeping.

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Box 2.1: The New World Order

"This is an historic moment… We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order, a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations. When we are successful, and we will be, we have a real chance at this new world order, an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfil the promise and vision of the UN's founders".

US President George H.W. Bush, 16 January 1991

One of the greatest alleged triumphs of the first President Bush's actions in the Gulf was his ability to mobilize such a broad-ranging coalition of states through the United Nations to support Operation Desert Storm. And seemingly crucial to this support was his invocation of basic principles of international law (see ch.16). With the defence of democracy a relatively less important rationale - most in the West viewed Kuwait as a feudal democracy - an alternative legitimating principle came into play.

2) Multilateral Action and Liberal States

Although Realists claim that military force is the ultimate form of power, Liberals find this claim problematic. They argue instead that the exertion of force is always influenced by other political factors, and moreover, must always be employed in tandem with other forms such as diplomacy, intelligence, economic influence, and media influence. For Liberals, pure force is a less efficient means of achieving one's will than persuasion and politics, which depend in turn on legitimacy and consent. In the international arena, these factors are created largely by multilateralism.

As discussed above, one of the seeming great triumphs of the first Bush presidency in relation to Iraq was the mobilization of a broad-ranging coalition of states to support Desert Storm. Though the first Gulf War was led by the US, it was backed by twenty-eight other states under a UN mandate. Importantly, this incorporated support from both Western liberal democracies and prominent Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia. Liberals point to American concern with securing UN authorization and creation of an international coalition as evidence of the importance of multilateralism and institutions.

Liberals generally believe that increased levels of interdependence and co-action through multilateral institutions also moderate the raw application of force by increasing the importance of economics as a policy instrument in international affairs (see ch.14 and 26). They point to Japan's role, which involved no warfighting but which, as the second-largest economy with an industrial interest in ensuring access to oil reserves, largely funded the Gulf War.

Finally, parts of the Liberal tradition emphasize the effect domestic societal factors play in mitigating the Realist ability to define Great Powers solely through military force assessment. States, particularly liberal democratic states, are reluctant to employ force if it involves the loss of life (the so-called "Vietnam syndrome"). The US, it is argued, is particularly reluctant to deploy troops into violent conflicts.

Box 2.2: The Highway of Death

Footage of cindered Iraqi corpses caught in the procession of vehicles on the main route out of Kuwait by Allied bombardment - the so-called "Highway of Death" - also surfaced after the cease-fire. Did President Bush call a premature halt to the ground war because he pessimistically anticipated the impact of such grotesque images on American public opinion…?

Susan Carruthers, The Media at War, pp.141-2.

That the awareness of the political repercussions of casualties in the Gulf War was influential in the early withdrawal of US troops is indicative of this. Liberal publics, it has been argued, are unwilling to sacrifice the lives of their own soldiers unless the national interest is directly at stake (Jentleson). Noting the sensitivity of liberal democratic states to casualties therefore influences our understanding of Western conduct of the war itself.

3) Safe Areas for the Kurds

Prior to, during, and since the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Kurds and Shiites of Iraq have suffered enormous repression from the (predominantly Sunni) Iraqi regime. In fact, the Kurds in Northern Iraq and Turkey have been seeking independent state-hood since around 1880 and have sustained human rights abuses from both Iraq and NATO ally Turkey. Since 1988, however, the regime in Baghdad intermittently used chemical weapons and has arguably also committed genocide against the Kurds (Stromseth, 1993: 81; Wheeler, 2000: 140).

Box 2.3: Western Culpability?

"Iraq's genocidal violence against its Kurdish population in the 1980s went essentially unsanctioned. French President François Mitterrand and the Reagan administration denounced Iraq's use of chemical weapons, but the international community failed to impose sanctions on Iraq for its attacks against the Kurds as political and strategic considerations once again overrode humanitarian concerns".

Jane Stromseth, 'Iraq', p.81.

Immediately after Operation Desert Storm, UN Resolution 688 established "no fly zones" for Iraqi forces along with "safe havens" to protect the Kurds. Western military forces, primarily from the US and UK, patrolled inside Iraqi territory from then on, and periodically bombed Iraqi forces when they were alleged to threaten these air patrols.

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Box 2.4: Safe Havens as Emergent Humanitarian Norms

The plight of the Kurds constituted a supreme humanitarian emergency and without outside military intervention hundreds of thousands would have died from hypothermia and exhaustion… The decision by [British Prime Minister] Major and [US President] Bush to launch the safe havens reflected a mix of humanitarian and non-humanitarian motives, but what matters is that, even if it is argued that Major and Bush acted only to appease domestic public pressures for intervention, this non-humanitarian motive did not conflict with the declared humanitarian purpose of the operation.

Nicholas Wheeler, 'A Solidarist Moment in International Society?', p.170.

Viewed through a liberal lens, the establishment of these safe havens may constitute a case of humanitarian intervention (see ch.30). Perhaps this is one example of a human rights policy embedded within an otherwise *Realpolitik* conflict.