

Cold War Theories, War on Terror Practices

Written by Edwin Daniel Jacob

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EDWIN DANIEL JACOB, OCT 18 2018

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Confronting new threats requires new thinking. Anachronistic understandings of security primarily arise from ideological suppositions that not only continue to frustrate prudent policy but also create increased insecurity. State failures, and the geopolitical disorder that followed, were born out of policies generated by reified thinking as to what constitutes material threats in a world order transfigured by the end of the Cold War. Yet Cold War thinking remains the guiding principle when approaching contemporary threats to state and international security alike (Jacob, 2017, xviii). Interrogating ideology—a category that begs attention in international relations—helps account for counterproductive security practices. An examination of Cold War theories, global “war on terror” practices, and the passé interplay between the two illuminates the ideological and structural checks that vex geopolitical order in this new century.

Realist Roots and Contemporary Confusion

Realist understandings of security reflected America’s geopolitical position during the Cold War and continue to serve as an untrustworthy guide towards contemporary security matters. As surely as World War I produced the conditions for a discipline to take shape, World War II culminated in a new understanding of a centuries-old view of human nature, under the banner of political realism, when extrapolated to international actors and the structural configurations of power that constrain them from acting with license. This state-centric approach to international affairs sees a Hobbesian “state of nature” underlying the anarchical structure of the global system. For Hobbes, this pre-political state is marked by a lack of constraint. Without a sovereign in place to command collective awe, humanity remains trapped in a war “all against all” (Hobbes 1983, 34). Lacking an arbitrating force to mediate warring parties, the only way to ensure state survival is through the maximization of power—the ability to coerce states into making decisions they would not otherwise make—at the expense of other states in a zero-sum universe. The last shots of World War II, the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, can thus be interpreted as the opening salvos of the Cold War: a warning to the US’s then-allied Soviet Union that America was in a new global power position and, more importantly, had the will to impose itself on the world stage.

Nation states are the principal domain of international relations broadly and security studies principally. But not all states carry the same weight. In theory, as well as in practice, it is the most powerful states within the international system that are scrutinized. Traditional paradigmatic approaches to these studies, in both realism and liberalism, view the survival of the nation state as the driving force behind what Morgenthau appropriately called a “politics among nations” in 1948. State centrism of this variety, as opposed to mid-range analyses of domestic structures and the like as they relate to international relations, made sense insofar as the “state” Morgenthau and his contemporaries were examining encapsulated the primary concern humanity faced for the better part of the twentieth-century: annihilation of the planet through a mutually assured destruction brought about by the West and/or Soviet Union. Transnational threats to security, as a consequence, took a back seat to this primary (international) concern.

Realists of all stripes have recognized the accumulation and maximization of interests—always defined in terms of “power”—as the central aim of the state to preserve its very survival since modern realism’s inception. Hans Morgenthau, the German exile who developed the modern variant of realism in America, put this matter well when he

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suggested that the “main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power” (Morgenthau 1973, 5). The theory and practice of politics in general and international relations in particular—or, a “sphere of action and understanding,” as Morgenthau conceived it—are thus separate from other such spheres, like economics (Morgenthau 1973, 5). Yet the political power exercised by the US after the Cold War manifested itself not in terms of a means to an end so much as a motivating factor, or, more precisely, an end in itself.

Despite its transnational character, terrorism was immediately linked with state referents—namely, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, or, collectively, Bush’s “Axis of Evil”—in prefabricated imperial agendas that had been in the works when America’s Cold War foil was crumbling. Throughout the nineties, for example, neo-conservative thinkers out of the halls of political power were hard at work developing stratagems to justify an increased military budget while accelerating an American presence throughout multiple spheres of influence in a new “unipolar” world (Krauthammer 1990). The specter of terrorism, a transnational ideology, thus allowed for a newly emboldened foreign policy agenda to take shape. Old imperial aims, which manifested most severely in Iraq, were sold in terms of preserving American security interests at home and abroad, yet they translated into further insecurity. But such counter-productive security measures did not start on Bush’s watch, nor would they end there. American foreign policy in the Middle East, the most fragile geopolitical flashpoint of the day, dates back to the Cold War.

From Cold War to Hot Mess

Cold War thinking has carried over and clouded America’s contemporary global “war on terror” practices. Brands of realism, the oldest paradigmatic approach to international relations, drove American foreign policy debates during its fifty-year-long Cold War with the Soviets. Its theoretical elegance spoke well to a global order where power was incarnated between two relatively equal poles. But translating realism’s theoretical tenets into political practice revealed an increasingly expedient character as the Cold War raged, thus providing conditions for a historically unmoored form of realism—a “hyper-realism” (or, more accurately, a pseudo-realism) adopted primarily by neo-conservative and liberal hawks—to develop ever more after war’s end.

Amoral attitudes towards power, and its distribution among other states, manifested in a litany of US incursions into the “third world” during the Cold War. Active military campaigns in Vietnam and Latin America were matched by clandestine interferences in sovereign elections in Guatemala and Iran in order to hedge power against a (sometimes) over-exaggerated Soviet threat. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, the US had 159 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) and 2,500 strategic bombers at her disposal as against the USSR’s two dozen ICBMs even as Kennedy projected the supposed “missile gap” the US needed to close with the Soviets (Preble 2003, 826). Seeds were, as a consequence, planted for various regional disorders that befell these parts of the globe after bipolarity was shattered without a direct shot having been fired between America and the Soviet menace. Without a check in the USSR following its collapse, US hegemony—underpinned by the logic of power—drove American foreign policy to expand mandates, grow anachronistic Cold War bureaucracies, and sidestep international institutions in favor of expanding political and economic influence throughout the globe.

This brash approach first manifested from the right. Left over Reaganite cold warriors in the George H. W. Bush Administration urged for a reinvigoration of American foreign policy rather than a skillful retrenchment, which would have primarily involved restructuring Cold War security organizations like NATO instead of moving it to the front door of the new Russian Federation. An adapted form of the devastating Versailles Treaty, the punitive accord that John Maynard Keynes labeled a “Carthaginian peace,” which caused (rightful) resentment and provided the preconditions for Hitler to re-litigate the First World War by engaging in another, is eerily striking (Keynes 2009, 43). But modern hegemonic gambles would not be restricted to America’s Cold War nemesis.

Suspicion over a reunified Germany, the veritable head of today’s EU under Merkel’s adept governance, coupled with the “miracle” in Japan—the massive economic boon in the Japanese economy during the eighties that elevated it to “superpower” status—shifted American foreign policy determinations to face old threats in new power positions (Scott and Crothers 1998, 17). With the political stabilization of the former and an economic slump in the latter, which produced the “lost decade,” however, its foreign policy was at a stalemate. With no great-power threat on the

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horizon, succeeding these events, the US shifted towards a humanitarian-oriented approach to global security. Such an approach involved intervening in regional disputes, from Iraq to Somalia under Bush, and Bosnia to Kosovo under Clinton. Selective interventions were taken up by international organizations and ad-hoc “coalitions of the willing” after the Berlin Wall fell and new transnational terrorist networks were on the rise. Responding to collapsed states, looming state failures, and active civil wars while abstaining from others, namely, the Rwandan “crisis,” spoke to this selectivity.

This arbitrary constabulary stance to provincial disorders during what I like to call the “interregnum,” the period between the end of the Cold War and the start of the global “war on terror,” informed imperial attitudes that underpinned America’s response to 9/11 and serve as a focal point for today’s geopolitical disorder. Other (anachronistic) spheres of influence—beyond America’s traditional regional hegemony of the Western hemisphere, which can be dated back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823—would be sought to dissuade supposed rising hegemony in other segments of the world. Dominance over one of the seven billion peoples of the world, though, was apparently not enough for what Raymond Aron deemed the “imperial republic” when describing American foreign policy from the end of World War II to the waning years of Vietnam in 1973 (Aron 1974).

What started in Afghanistan and Iraq and, later, Libya crippled America’s legitimacy at home and abroad (Walt 2006, 62ff). More than that, these actions readily kneecapped a meaningful political response to the Syrian Civil War in favor of symbolic “red lines” to persuade Assad to stop using chemical weapons (Chollet 2016). Operating on what John Dewey would call a “warranted assumption,” Russia and China vetoed a half-dozen UN Security Council measures related to the beleaguered Civil War. Their shared military and economic ties with Assad perhaps spoke less to their decisions than did their mutual distrust not only of the structural imbalance of power within the Security Council but also to the US’ proclivity to over-engage themselves in humanitarian interventions.

Dusted off imperial policies like these markedly coalesced under the banners of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism in a global landscape absent an equal power, or sets of allied powers, to dissuade such offshore adventures after the end of the Cold War in general and the start of the global “war on terror” in particular. How such extensions serve American interests—in a world short on peer competitors, revisionist states, and rising powers—remains an open question. Operating under a reified realist doxy, whereby the US asserts itself internationally in terms of balancing power, has been done so in the breach. America has unwittingly become a revisionist state itself, the type of which is verbosely chastised from the DC establishment and the halls of the academy alike. Along with that always comes the threat of American action to dissuade such moves—from the left as well as the right.

What’s in a Name?

Neo-conservatism and liberalism-interventionism, the two predominant foreign policy models, are ultimately distinguished by the means they take to arrive at their desired ends. Skeptical of supranational institutions like the UN and NATO, neo-conservatives prefer unilateral force and have no qualms about preemptive wars, even though they worked with autocratic regimes and supported inchoate anti-communist guerilla groups when liberalization was deemed unrealistic during the Cold War (Kirkpatrick 1979, 44). That attitude changed, of course, when Bush—unfettered by Cold War constraints—put forth his “freedom agenda” (Bush 2005). Liberal-interventionists, by contrast, seek to encourage liberalization of sovereign states through multilateral interventions. This penchant arises from neo-liberalism’s emphasis on economics, multilateral engagement in an interdependent world, and a reactive foreign policy that is marked by a defensive posture. Both approaches, which, to different extents, betray the traditions they signify, attempt to bring about the same ends: export ideology abroad through martial means. Distinctions with minimal differences thus separate these two camps, with the manner in which force is being used—America alone or an equal among partners—as the determining factor.

Yet both camps (continually) fail to appreciate how their illiberal means are seen through the eyes of the “other” in question. Nor is it apparent whether or not they understand the degree to which their actions have engendered new threats in their attempts to export their brands of democracy on the ends of bayonets. Failed attempts to quell transnational terrorist networks bemuse these ideologues because of the state-centrism informing their respective approaches to foreign affairs. Deep-rooted presuppositions of American exceptionalism bred the mistaken

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assumption that terrorism (a transnational threat) could be fought like any other traditional state-based rival, with primacy given to military responses as a panacea for global order through extended spheres of influence. These spheres need not be competitive in nature, though, inasmuch as they simply co-exist in a state of equilibrium that Kautsky identified as “ultra-imperialism” a hundred years before ISIS controlled more than 30,000 square miles of land in Iraq and Syria alone (Kautsky 1970, 46).

Cold War stratagems were developed in accord with defeating—or, at the very least, mitigating—a specific threat to America’s national interests. Retarding the regional and global spread of Soviet Marxism, without running the risk of a direct engagement, was the consummate aim of US policy throughout the Cold War. Whether this meant preventing Soviet expansion through policies of containment or appeasing the Soviets and thawing out tensions through *détente* was subject to the particular geopolitical situation at hand. Yet with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and a growing threat in transnational terrorism, which festered for decades before reaching its apex on 9/11, American security has increasingly lacked specificity.

Strategic determinations to defeat terrorism have been developed in accord with a geopolitical landscape that no longer exists. The same pseudo-realist policies that guided America’s grand strategy against the USSR (particularly, leveraging American power to contain Soviet Russia) are still being operationalized. But little reference is given to the structural reconfiguration the international order underwent after bipolarity was shattered and American preeminence was all but guaranteed following the Cold War. It is as if the Cold War never ended. Operating under such logic, new spheres of influence must be exploited to counter would-be rival hegemonic state threats that simply do not exist, despite Putin’s desire to reconstitute former Soviet lands. Irrational calls to reengage Russia, beyond the counterproductive sanctions already levied against it by the US after its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and alleged collusion with the Trump campaign in 2016, typify the disoriented priorities shared by both sides in Washington (Ashford 2017).

Paramount moments have a unique logic all their own. Strategic determinations designed to face old enemies when used in the breach to fight new ones always end in security failures. Yet this practice has gained increasing traction since the Cold War epoch ended and our epoch of terror began. Transnational threats to American security have been treated in anachronistic state-centric terms that attempt to conceal the ideological component that undergirds a host of modern security failures. Bush’s decision to link bin Laden’s (transnational) al-Qaeda with Saddam’s Iraq, for instance, had less to do with countering terrorism than it did with providing an “interim goal” in America’s desired agenda concerning a “Greater Middle East” (Bacevich 2016, 243). That Iran emerged from the Iraq War not as America’s next target but as a bolstered regional power when power shifted from a tripolar arrangement between Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia into a bipolar one between (Shia) Iran and (Sunni) Saudi Arabia confirms the “iron law of unintended consequences” in action. This law, however, is not confined to neo-conservatives. Such was the also the case with Obama’s expanded drone program. While it surely effected a veritable collapse of al-Qaeda and associated terrorist groups, it also provided preconditions for radicalization as a result of extreme civilian casualties and culminated in the formation of elective affinities between moderates and militant Islamists. More problematic, perhaps, were the calls for imposing “no-fly” zones à la Iraq circa the nineties to tamper fighting in the Syrian Civil War. Had they gone into force, the prospects for war between proxy forces aiding Assad and those of his rivals would have surely turned this geopolitical flashpoint into an uncontrollable international crisis. Ill-guided policies like these not only fail to mitigate the insecurity they seek to address but also tend to exacerbate and intensify it in the process by creating new enemies and, as a consequence, further insecurity.

The Art of Peace and War

American foreign policy in the epoch of terror has been undertaken without reference to a theory, or policy framework, that accounts for non-state threats to security. Academically, this epistemic dearth is a product of the instrumentality of a discipline that markets itself a “science.” Such a descriptive renders undue legitimacy to what Machiavelli understood as an art from the beginning. Narrow-mindedness and miscalculation, however, are not exclusive to the ivory tower. Not to be outdone by parochial disciplinarians of the academy, security practitioners exhibited a “failure of imagination,” an inability to “connect the dots,” and a mind-set that “dismissed possibilities” to thwart 9/11 (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 2004, 336).

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Given this historical miasma, it is little wonder that prudent responses to countering ISIS' rise were so sorely absent from most quarters. Attempts to combat ISIS wavered between using unilateral strikes and cooperating in multilateral engagements from the start. But a sense of urgency was, naturally, added when the barbarous al-Qaeda outgrowth hit the West—from the 2015 attacks in Paris and San Bernardino to the 2016 Brussels bombing and Orlando nightclub shooting—in numerous lone wolf attacks. Appeals for the US to declare war on ISIS (as it supposedly should have against its predecessor, al-Qaeda, following 9/11) were equally matched by calls for NATO to invoke Article Five of its charter (the collective security provision that treats an attack upon one member state as an attack against all) to counter the group. Each approach mischaracterized the transnational threat it sought to fight, and, worse yet, had either been implemented, the result would have been an intensification of the very situation it sought to remedy.

America's incompetent reactions to 9/11 and the Arab Spring may lie at the heart of this geopolitical instability and regional insecurity. But the thinking that generated these failed security practices under Presidents Bush and Obama, with their neo-conservative and neo-liberal coteries, was a shared ideological vision. Policy ends, to be sure, were undertaken by different means: Obama's preference for international cooperation replaced his predecessor's zeal for unilateralism and preemption. Yet the same practice remained through different forms. Obama was able to resist the more vociferous foreign policy voices within his administration from Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry and US Ambassadors to the UN Susan Rice and Samantha Power. But underlying these figures' thinking was an American hegemonic presence to adjudicate any and all geopolitical crises from Libya and Syria in North Africa and the Middle East to reinvigorating tensions with Russia over its invasion of Crimea despite the lessons they should have learned from Bush's failed crusade in Iraq.

Numerous "war on terror" policies were adopted to fight terrorism since 9/11. Bush's unilateralism and preemption—the pillars of his Bush Doctrine—translated into a policy of regime change. Rather than continuing to contain Saddam, as well as other "rogue states" in the region, Bush and his neo-conservative cadre and liberal hawk travelers sought to use 9/11 as a pretext to assert direct hegemony in the Middle East. Attacking Iraq, the weakest state in that region, would thus only serve as an initial step in a much larger agenda. One need only recall the rhetoric that presaged 9/11 to get a flavor for what this group had in store if the Iraq invasion proved successful. Iraq was but the first of seven other states—Syria, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iran—the US sought to conquer in five years (Clark 2007, 230-231).

For all their differences, liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives share a key assumption: sovereignty is conditional to the whims of "first-world" powers and institutions. Westphalian Peace brought with it new, and long lasting, understandings of the internal and external modern nation state. States were, in principle, autonomous units free to conduct their internal affairs as they best saw fit. Self-regulation and autonomy thus served to legitimate sovereign territories to militate against the religious wars that ravaged seventeenth-century Europe and a third of its population. But once the state goes, so too go the conditions for security. Sovereignty and security are linked insofar as the absence of the former precludes the existence of the latter (Jacob 2017, 93-104). The failure to take this fundamental relationship into account when designing American foreign policies has further intensified a fractious geopolitical landscape marked by one sovereign crisis or another. Most of these crises, be it in Iraq or Libya or Syria, were the result of American foreign policies that favored short-term expediency over a prudent strategy that would result in long-term stability and order: the guiding stone of realism from its inception.

Recovering Realism

Renewed attention has been focused on recovering realism from its various positivist offshoots that were heralded in by the behavioral revolution in the social sciences. In an attempt to develop a systemic "theory" of geopolitics, neo- or structural-realists divorced values from interests as they substituted the primacy of human nature, which underpinned classical realist thought, with a reified point of reference in "world order." This move towards a structural foundation, however, did little to foster a more robust predictive ability among scholars of international relations in general and those of security studies in particular. Worse, it intensified an already growing divide between those who study policy and those who make it. Any statesperson can bandy their realist credentials where matters of foreign policy are concerned but few, if any, can draw distinctions between the various sub-traditions that make up the school of

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thought to which they supposedly subscribe. The cross-purposes at which these isolated camps talk has been matched by the confusion modern realists face when they proffer their (always right) suggestions among themselves from the breach.

Recovering realism will require today's realists to determine where they stand on key issues that will inform future security concerns as surely as they produced the security failures for which America is still paying the price. Security practices, from rendition and torture to preemptive strikes and nation building to drones and assassinations, show the insoluble link between ethics and security. Each of these disastrous practices was built upon exigent maneuvers that were based in instrumental thinking devoid of the long-term implications such stopgap measures would promote. Present in each were the seeds for increased disorder over the long run. Ethical calculus is worthless if security is simply a matter of short-term efficacy. But an ethical commitment to security is both a sufficient and necessary condition since stability is the cornerstone of realism. Failure to mediate these ethical components of security will only repeat yesterday's mistakes, namely, generating further insecurity by carrying out imprudent security measures in times of crisis. A normative component thus founds any security measure wherein someone, some group, or some state pays the ultimate price for America's fleeting security.

American security practices have evinced an arbitrary character that cuts off its nose to spite its face. Short-term thinking that replaces an overall strategy with isolated tactics has led to the geopolitical quagmire in which the US finds itself. Old reference points no longer hold in an age marked by transnational security threats that do not align with traditional security frameworks. While strategic thinking is embraced by America's terrorist foes, America itself has yet to develop a security strategy that distinguishes between strategy and the tactics that foster its strategic goals. This radical divide is explored in the concluding chapter in order to generate new ideas to face the new threats that continue to inhibit security at home and stability abroad.

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