The Struggle for Recognition: An Explanation of Iraq War

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Received: 22.03.2015; Accepted: 29.05.2015

Abstract. This article seeks to find a more convincing explanation of Iraq War by the explanatory framework of the struggle for recognition. States continuously struggle for thin recognition-recognition of their sovereignty and right to life-and thick recognition-recognition of their particular identity and status in the international system. This article seeks to define a mechanism for struggle for recognition to explain how this kind of struggle occurs in the international system. This article analyses how a state’s strategy of struggle for recognition produces conditions conducive to war. By scrutinizing the United States’ struggle for recognition of the status of hegemony, this study finds that the United States’ deeds under the strategy of social competition prepared the ground for Iraq War.

Keywords: Struggle for recognition, Iraq War, Social Mobility

INTRODUCTION

War is a recurring phenomenon in International Politics. Identifying the causes of war has been the most important drive in establishing International Relations as a university major. Scholars with different specializations have tried to explain war. The ongoing effort to understand and explain wars goes back to the spectacular work of Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian war. (Small and Singer, 1970)

For most of the human life, war has been a natural mechanism to settle disputes. It seemed that whenever the circumstances were favorable to war, war waging was inevitable. It was assumed that states go to war to maximize their benefits or to defend themselves from aggression. The Great War of 1914 developed a whole new thinking in this regard. There appeared a new question: Why war happens though it brings out damages and no benefits? The post-World War I idealists attempted to eradicate war. Not only their efforts could not eradicate wars, but also it led to ignoring devastating motivations of Nazis. Another stream of thought with its acknowledgement of the inevitability of war took shape. These scholars tried to explain wars and blamed human evil nature, anarchy of the international system and bourgeoisies. Although many explanations have been offered, war still happens.

As for Iraq War, the official narrative of war emphasized the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Bush administration insisted it is highly probable that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction could be possessed by terrorist groups such as Al Qaida and there will be grave threat. Kenneth Pollack in Threatening Storm argues that the policy of containing Iraq was inefficient

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Special Issue: Technological Advances of Engineering Sciences

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and invading Iraq was the only option. (Pollack, 2002) Ruth Wedgewood in National Law Review article stated that Iraq had begun its menacing WMD program and its time to attack Iraq. (Wedgewood, 2002) Articles and books that were making the case for attacking Iraq were mainly published during 2001-2003. After the war, no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq and a new avalanche of writings pointed to manipulation of US information on Iraq’s probable WMD program. Goss and Harman from House Intelligence Committee in a letter to George Tenet the then CIA director reiterated that manipulation: “The Intelligence available to the U.S. on Iraq’s possession of WMD and its program and capabilities relating to such weapons after 1998, and its link to al-Qa’ida was fragmentary and sporadic…The absence of proof that chemical and biological weapons and their related development programs had been destroyed was considered as proof that they continue to exist.”(Jamieson, 2007)

There are other explanations of Iraq War which are in sharp contrast with the official justification. These statements are mainly based on Marxist-Leninist theories of war. It is a known truth that US policy makers attach a great importance to Persian Gulf oil. In this regard, the United States wages wars in the region to control Persian Gulf oil. John Chapman believes that there were two reasons for invading Iraq; namely, controlling oil and maintaining dollar as the global exchange. He quotes Dick Cheney: “Whoever controls the flow of Persian Gulf oil has a stranglehold not on our economy but also on the other countries of the world as well.”(Chapman, 2004)

The author believes that with the explanatory framework of struggle for recognition, a more convincing explanation of war can be offered. Recognition in this context is a social theory concept developed mostly by Hegel and Axel Honneth. The main question to be answered is as follows: Does struggle for recognition produce conditions conducive to war? To answer this question, the pre Iraq War era and particular circumstances that have led to this war will be analyzed to see if a heightened struggle for recognition had taken place.

This article is divided into two sections. Section 1 outlines the explanatory framework of the struggle for recognition. Concept of recognition is discussed in section one and a mechanism for struggle for recognition will be defined. In section 2, the causes of Iraq war will be explained by the framework outlined in section 1. The conclusion discusses further research of the explanatory framework of struggle for recognition.

The Struggle for Recognition

Recognition: Thick and Thin

Recognition as a concept in philosophy and social theory was utilized by Hegel to explain the transition from the state of nature toward formation of the state and ethical society. (Honneth, 1995) As Hegel rejects the state of nature doctrine, he speaks of a “first man”, “first man” in Hegel’s thought “desires the desire of other men, that is, to be wanted by others or to be recognized. Indeed, for Hegel, an individual could not become self-conscious, that is, become aware of himself as a separate human being, without being recognized by other human beings.”(Fukuyama, 1992) Human being’s desire to be recognized as human leads to a violent conflict. This conflict begets dialectic of Master-Slave in which one party in face of death accepts to live as a slave. (Fukuyama, 1992)
Recognition is defined as follows: “to be recognized means to be seen or regarded—whether directly or through mediation of social and political institutions—under some practically significant description; that is, under a description that makes a difference in the way its bearer is treated, perhaps even shaping the terms in which she understands herself, and which thereby helps to configure her powers and possibilities” (Markell, 2006). Put more simply, all human beings have fundamental need to be recognized by others through which “self” will be constituted.

The process of recognition is divided into different stages that satisfy different level of the need of recognition. An individual in the first place is recognized in her family as an independent individual. In the next stage, she is recognized as an equal member in the society. Recognizing the role of each individual in the society is the next stage of recognition. Through these stages, an individual earns “self-respect”, “self-confidence” and “self-esteem”. (Honneth, 1995)

In international politics, acts of recognition determine the right to life. As Greenhill put it, “recognition matters to international politics because it represents the process through which actors come to exist as actors within the international system and take on a particular identity within that system”. (Greenhill, 2008) In this context, states struggle for recognition to earn the right to life and to be accepted as equal members in the international community. This process has been defined as “thin recognition”. (Wendt, 2003) The struggle for thin recognition is reflected in states’ desire to be recognized as equal sovereigns. For example, the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution expected the international community to accept her as a legitimate state. (Ringmar, 2002) The Communist China dealt with the same problem after 1949 revolution. There is a broader struggle for recognition in which states’ unique characters, identities, roles and status is respected. This form of struggle for recognition is defined as “thick recognition”. (Wendt, 2003) For example, states’ desire to be recognized as a hegemon or great powers or any particular identity or status such as the leader of the Muslim world or the Arab world can be categorized as a form of struggle for thick recognition.

A Mechanism for Struggle for Recognition

Almost all the works on struggle for recognition in international relations have not responded to a key question on recognition: How does struggle for recognition take place in the international system? If states struggle to earn the right to life or they want their identity or status to be recognized by others, how do they materialize this? Larson and Shevchenko (2010) in their work on status seeking turned to Social Identity Theory (SIT) to define mechanisms for status seeking in international relations. Social Identity Theory explains how social groups struggle to earn a distinctive identity. According to this theory, people get some part of their identity through membership in certain social groups. They tend to compare their achievements with the referent groups who have equal or higher status. Therefore the individual’s desire to be recognized by the referent groups who have equal or higher status is the main focus of Social Identity Theory. I believe that status seeking mechanisms in Social Identity Theory can be used as mechanisms for the struggle for recognition in the international system.

There are three mechanisms for status seeking in Social Identity Theory; that is, Social Mobility, Social Competition and Social Creativity. Social mobility is defined as follows: “If the boundaries of higher-status groups are permeable, a lower-status group may conform to the norms of an elite group to gain acceptance, pursuing the strategy of social mobility.” (Larson and Shevchenko,
In pursuing social mobility in international relations, states accept the rules and norms of the referent or elite groups and they tend to act as if they are the members of those groups. For example, Iran in its bid to join Shanghai Cooperation Organization adopted the strategy of social mobility. In a similar way, turkey’s desire to join EU led this country toward social mobility.

Social competition is defined as follows: “If elite group boundaries are impermeable to new members, the lower-status group may strive for equal or superior status through a strategy of social competition”. (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010) This strategy leads to tensions and violent conflicts. Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Libya under Gaddafi and North Korea are significant examples of the adoption of social competition. “Indicators of social competition include arms racing, rivalry over spheres of influence, military demonstrations aimed at one-upmanship or military intervention against a smaller power, so long as the purpose is to influence others’ perceptions rather than attain security or power.”(Larson and Shevchenko, 2010) States with different capabilities and vulnerabilities who adopt social competition experience very different consequences.

Larson and Shevchenko (2010) have defined social creativity as follows: “When the status hierarchy is perceived as legitimate or stable, groups may seek prestige in a different area altogether, exercising social creativity. This may be done by (1) reevaluating the meaning of a negative characteristic, or (2) finding a new dimension on which their group is superior.” A good example of this strategy can be seen in turkey’s policy. Turkey has shown a democratic image alongside its Islamism. It is a model of compatibility between Islam and democracy; therefore, Turkey’s strategy of social creativity has increased its soft power in the international system.

It must be noted that different degrees of these strategies can be seen in states’ behavior. Although Turkey in its demonstrated compatibility of Islam and democracy shows a great degree of social creativity, in response to some European countries’ opposition to its bid to join EU, it has adopted social competition by its harsh criticism of Israel.

In order to understand that how above status seeking strategies can be used to explain how the struggle for recognition takes place, we should understand the context in which the struggle for recognition occurs. Cultures of anarchy as the structures of the international system determine the context. According to Alexander Wendt, there are three cultures of anarchy, that is, Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian. (Wendt, 1999) In the Hobbesian culture, the concept of enmity is dominant. In this culture, “Enemies are constituted by representations of the Other as an actor who (1) who does not recognize the right of the self to exist as an autonomous being and therefore (2) will not willingly limits its violence toward the Self”.(Wendt, 1999) Wendt believes that there is no complete recognition exists under this culture.(Wendt, 2003) The relationship between the powerful and the weak can be represented as Master-Slave relationship in which a very harsh struggle for recognition is underway. In Lockean culture, the concept of rivalry is dominant. In this culture, states recognize others’ sovereignty. (Wendt, 2003) By recognizing sovereignty, states recognize others’ right to life in the international system. In Kantian culture, states not only recognize others’ sovereignty, but also they are deeply committed to peaceful settlement of disputes. The concept of friendship is dominant in this culture.

Although the North America and the Western Europe experience Kantian culture in their relations with each other; Currently, most part of the world live under the Lockean culture. Even very weak
and small states continue to exist. Therefore, the struggle for recognition in its thin sense takes place peacefully. States normally recognize others’ sovereignty and right to life. Any new state can become a member to the United Nations through which it is accepted in the international community. The favorite strategy for any state in the struggle for thin recognition is social mobility. Any state who wants to be accepted as a member of the international community must commit itself to rules and norms of this community. On the other hand, the struggle for thick recognition is still open to any of the strategies mentioned above; that is, social mobility, social competition and social creativity. A state who wants to be recognized as a great power may choose one of those. As a general rule, it must be accepted by existing great powers. In the course of history, achieving great-power status was done by winning a great war, as in the case of Japan’s victory against Russia in 1905. Therefore, the strategy of social competition was the favorite choice in this regard. Currently, it can be achieved by having a greater say in managing international affairs which is represented in attaining permanent membership to the United Nations Security Council or Group of 7. Therefore the boundaries of this elite group of great powers are permeable and the state who wants to become a great power may choose social mobility and social creativity. For example, Russia’s social mobility compelled G7 members to accept Russia and G7 became G8. Russia’s social competition in Ukraine led to expulsion of Russia from G8. Again it must be noted that different degrees of these strategies can be seen in states’ behavior simultaneously. In the next section, Iraq War 2003 will be explained by the explanatory framework of the struggle for recognition discussed above.

Iraq War

To explain Iraq War by the explanatory framework of the struggle for recognition, we should examine whether traces of struggle for thin or thick recognition can be seen in the pre-war period.

Struggle for Thin Recognition

Regarding thin recognition, although Iraq and the United States had recognized each others’ sovereignty, thin recognition did not exist at government level and there was no diplomatic relations between Iraq and the United States. It means that these two countries implicitly viewed each other as threats.

After the eleven September attacks, the Bush administration projected Iraq as a part of the axis of evil. The more the United States viewed Iraq as a threat, the more thin recognition between these two governments weakened. It must be noted that the Bush administration act about the axis of evil was a consequence its struggle for thick recognition.

Struggle for Thick Recognition

Regarding thick recognition, a very interesting question arises: did the United States’ struggle for recognition of its status of hegemon produce conditions conducive to war? Hegemon as a single state with the most power and influence at the system level encounters problems for its recognition. It must be noted that there is no club or circle or elite group of hegemons in which the new hegemon would be accepted. Therefore, a hegemon cannot adopt the strategy of social mobility. Any hegemon in its struggle for recognition must choose between social competition and social creativity. As hegemon cannot be recognized by an equal-status actor, it feels insecure in this regard. On one hand, if the existing hegemon choose the path of social competition, it is
highly probable that wars and conflicts will happen. On the other hand, if the existing hegemon chooses the path of social creativity, its actions will be more peaceful and leads to less or no war and conflicts.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States tended to exert its power and influence in a global scale. The concept of the New World Order was proposed to build an international system based on the American values. Although the concept of the New World Order can be represented as an idea emanated from the social creativity, the United States in materializing this idea chose the strategy of social competition.

The ever-increasing gap between the United States’ power and other states led this country toward unilateralism. Two elements of unprecedented terrorism threat and ideology of neo-conservatism prepared the ground for an imperial ambition to establish a true hegemony. Neo-conservatives believed that “the Hobbesian world still continue to exist” (Kagan, 2003). In this worldview, the United States as the leading actor need superior power to survive. Neo-conservatives also believed that the only reliable defense against the collapse of international peace is the US hegemony. (Kagan and Kristol, 1996)

The United States defined a new world order in which no other state could challenge its primacy. The United States desired to remove any threats through doctrines of preemptive and preventive attacks. Use of force and unilateralism became the favorite tool and path to resolve international problems. The al-Qai’da attacks on US soil gave the best excuse to the American policy makers to turn a dream into reality.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important findings in this article is that a hegemon faces a recognition dilemma in the international system. There is no elite group or club of hegemons in the international system, therefore any hegemon in struggle for recognition of its hegemony can only choose between social competition and social creativity. The United States in the post eleven September era during the Bush administration chose social competition by using excessive force and unilateralism which in turn produced conditions conducive to war. These conditions paved the way for Iraq War.

The explanatory framework of the struggle for recognition can be used in further research on causes of other wars. The author believes that this explanatory framework give us a more convincing explanation of wars. Further research should be planned on the reasons why a state chooses a certain strategy to satisfy its recognition needs.

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