

# Analysis of the Causes of the Iraq War from Rationalism Perspective

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**Abstract.** The causes of the Iraq war can be analyzed from both non-rationalism and rationalism. This essay will discuss that the rationalist framework can give a more suitable insight into the purpose and reason driving these states to act. First of all, for the definition of the rationalist framework, it assumes the actors acting rationally. This essay will outline the Iraq War and analyze its reasons from rationalism, resulting in three main causes, power transition, uncertainty and expected value. All of them would lead to the same outcome, preventive war. On the other hand, this essay will discuss the Non-rationalist analysis and I will oppose these explanations to conclude that rationalism can provide a more accurate explanation.

**Keywords:** Iraq War; Rationalism Perspective; Non-rationalist Perspective.

## 1. Introduction

Before the September 11 attacks in 2001, America took almost no action, but President George Bush's principal advisers expressed interest in the invasion of Iraq. When President Bush publicly expressed no tolerance for the possession of nuclear weapons by the most dangerous regime,[1] America officially started to lay a public foundation for the invasion of Iraq in January 2002. The invasion of Iraq by coalition forces headed by America on March 20, 2003, marked the beginning of the Iraq War. The Iraqi army was quickly subdued. Finally, America captured the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein on December 13, 2003. [2] The Bush administration attributed the primary reason for the war to the declaration of Iraq's nuclear program that pose a direct and formidable threat to America and its allies.[3] They stated that the nuclearization of Iraq can lead to a crucial challenge to the international equilibrium of power, which would benefit Iraq. George W. Bush and his "war cabinet" demonstrated that Saddam did not cooperate with nuclear arms inspections in Iraq and asserted that the only way to eliminate the threat of Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons was the war.[4] Soon after the invasion, the rationale for launching the war was questioned, since some intelligence agencies disbelieved the evidence supporting that Iraq developed nuclear weapons. Therefore, the Bush administration switched the reason to emphasize America's mission of countering terrorism and protection of human rights.[5] America's invasion of Iraq is a very complicated issue rife with controversies that many scholars have put forward their explanations, and have argued which framework and perspective can most accurately analyze and determine the cause of the war.

## 2. Rationalist Perspective: Preventive War

### 2.1 Power Transition

Preventive war is the war to forestall the opponent from becoming stronger and acquiring a capacity for attacking. The fear drives the state to strategically attack for preventing the opponent get favour from a power transition. [6] Rationalism believes that in an anarchist global system, the growth of the military strength of one party leads to the relative decrease of the security of another state. [7] Therefore, the large-scale and rapid power shift is a sufficient and strong motive for war, and weapons of mass destruction are the biggest factor.[7] The possession of weapons of mass destruction indicates a shortcut or a capability to confront a superpower such as America. And once the terrorists hostile to America possess it, the consequences for America are disastrous and fatal. Therefore, George W. Bush emphasized that the most significant threat to America's national security lies in the combination of violent extremism and technology.[8] After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush

administration said that Al Qaeda's no possession of weapons of mass destruction was the only fortunate to America. His speech directly reflects America's fear of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and indicates that America tends to intervene in advance in parties that intend to manufacture weapons of mass destruction.[9] Thus, Iraq's transparent arms investment catalyzed America's decision of preventive wars. [9] In this way, the rationalist framework can accurately explain the Bush administration's fear of Iraq's nuclear weapons investment which could result in a rapid and sudden power transition.

## 2.2 Uncertainty

Besides that, the uncertainty caused by incomplete information resulted in preventive war. Saddam's equivocation and refusal of cooperation in investigating whether Iraq was really carrying out nuclearization could be regarded as a threat leading to a power transition. His ambiguity may be a ploy to appear strong and confuse neighbouring Iran, hence avoiding possible attack. [10] On the other hand, it led to uncertainty about Iraq's indeed intentions, which trapped America into a security dilemma. A few days before the beginning of the Iraq War, the Iraqis were desperately striving to prove that they had indeed destroyed these chemical weapons and did not hide them. Unfortunately, they failed to remove America's fear and doubt. According to John Mearsheimer's theory, the state is in a state of "fear" because it cannot grasp the intentions of the "other". Therefore, the state must make the worst assessments and assumptions about the intentions of the other, and always uphold the "maximum power". This can explain why America was motivated to choose preventive war even though the claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that can be activated within 45 minutes did not have other supporting evidence, such as weapons stocks or active production lines.[11] The fear drove America to remain skeptical of and seriously treat the possibility of Iraq secretly pursuing a nuclear program. The logic of America can be further illustrated by the "One Percent Doctrine" proposed by Vice President Dick Cheney, which emphasized that America must treat "low probability, high impact" events as if they are certain.[12] Therefore, although America falsely asserted that Iraq was pursuing weapons of mass destruction program, the rationalist framework still explains logically why it led to the result of the American invasion of Iraq.

## 2.3 Expected Value

In the rationalist decision-making process, the decision-maker will fully calculate the expected value brought by a certain action. The state, as a rational decision-maker, must get the expected value, before actions, through comprehensively evaluating the cost of taking actions, the possibility of success, overall losses or benefits as the result.[10] This principle of expected value or prospect theory provides a reasonable explanation for why America chose to attack Iraq instead of North Korea, which was more threatening to America as it has been on suspicion of conducting nuclear programs.[13] America has already prepared the war scheme, during the 1994 nuclear crisis. William Perry, Clinton's special envoy for North Korea and former secretary of defense believed they can win the war, but he also foresaw the following outcome that that North Korea would revenge against South Korea and that the animosity would devour the area in a devastating war. Perry promised Kim that he deeply understands the negative impacts of war and staked out his position of no war on the issue.[14] The cost of causing major losses to South Korea, the US's ally, has led America not to act. Besides that, North Korea already demonstrated its capability to destroy South Korea since America found M-1978 artillery at Koksan County in 1978.[15] Therefore, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons which were used for the same purpose of deterrence made no difference to the global military-political situation.[16] Therefore, launching a war to eliminate North Korea's nuclear arsenal would be a wrong decision that costs more than benefits.

In contrast to South Korea, the precedent of the 1991 Gulf War assured America of the high possibility of success and minimal losses as a result of the invasion of Iraq.[17] Considering the elimination of future threats without cost, the expected benefit of the invasion of Iraq is very high. Alternatively, if America chose not to invade, Iraq's nuclear program was indeed under progress, then

America had to face a fatal loss. Due to the uncertainty of Iraq ending a nuclear program, in America's view, the possibility of secretly manufacturing nuclear weapons still exists. [18] After comprehensively evaluating and comparing the consequences of the two choices, preventive war was undoubtedly the most profitable decision for America. [19]

### **3. Non-rationalist Perspective**

#### **3.1 Cognitive Biases**

Some people have emphasized cognitive biases to prove that rationalist explanation is not sufficient for America's decision of invading Iraq.[20] Confirmation bias is evident during the Bush administration's decision-making process towards Iraq. The Bush administration completely ignored warning signs and other negative messages and regarded the determined action scheme as the sole, right and effective way.[21] In 2001, America successfully subverted the Taliban government. Doubts were reverberating across America about the military intervention in Iraq, but the Bush administration still pursued rationalization of the action. They always displayed strong uniformity, consensus and conviction on overthrowing the Saddam government was an essential strategic milestone in America's counter-terrorism history. Driven by confirmation bias, they consciously sought intelligence that can support their decision. As Paul Pillar said, intelligence was a tool utilized by the Bush administration to verify his conclusion and rationalize decisions that have already been made, rather than objectively seeking new insights.[22] The heavily figuring on the 9/11 attacks in the decision making towards Iraq reflected the recency bias of the Bush administration.[23] Besides that, Bush admission also suffered from a stereotype of Saddam's regime. Because Saddam has waged two wars since his appointment, namely the Iran-Iraq War and the invasion of Kuwait, America has labelled the Saddam regime as belligerent and aggressive. [24]

Although these biases influenced actors to some extent, they cannot affect as the decisive justification for the Iraq invasion. The discussion of the influencing extent of these biases in a country's decision-making process must be based on a rationalist frame. Therefore, these explanations of cognitive biases further validated war from different perspectives, but they cannot be regarded as the root of war.

#### **3.2 Self-deception**

Some people attribute the Iraq war to Saddam's Self-deception. Because in the face of the deterrence issued by America weapons of mass destruction, Saddam still did not cooperate with the investigation. Therefore, the American hawk asserted that Saddam was either irrational or prone to serious misjudgments, so they must take the war to stop him from possessing weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. Kenneth Pollack, the former director for Gulf affairs at the National Security Council and a supporter of the war against Iraq, argues that Saddam is "unintentionally suicidal." [25]

In fact, Saddam's seemingly irrational behaviours are actually rational through the rationalist explanation. During his domination over Iraq for more than 30 years, he launched two wars against neighbouring countries. In this regard, Saddam's record is no worse than that of neighbouring countries, Egypt and Israel that have fought many wars since 1948. In addition, a comprehensive analysis of the two wars launched by Saddam Saddam can reveal that his behaviour is not irrational. He evaluated and compared the situation of Iraq and its opponent which was isolated and vulnerable. His war goal was to correct "the strategic dilemma faced by Iraq through limited military victory".[26]

By the same logic, he created uncertainty on the inspection in order to make Iran and possibly Israel's regional neighbours too worried to attack.[27] This behavior of deterring the enemy is very consistent with rationalist thinking.

## 4. Conclusion

This article analyses some of the reasons for America's invasion of Iraq and proves that the rationalist frame can offer the most appropriate and logical explanation of why America is motivated to launch the war. In the essay, I discussed the objections from several irrational theories, and through dialectical analysis, I explained that the rationalist perspective provides a more convincing view to understanding the causes of the Iraq war. Regarding the Iraq War involving many parties, there are other many perspectives and theories to analyze the complexity of the black box of political decision-making.

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