

Bluffing its way into power: Liberal-lite interventionism

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, SEP 14 2011

I recently read an insightful blog entry by a doctoral candidate at LSE, John Collins. The entry neatly outlines how liberal intervention in Iraq impacted the foreign policies of Iran and North Korea, as well as discusses how NATO's engagement in Libya relates to liberal interventionism. In particular, the lesson Iran and North Korea learnt as a product of Iraq's liberal intervention; the lesson being that, 'instead of seeing Iraq's perceived WMD program as the cause for the invasion, they viewed Iraq's lack of a credible nuclear deterrent as enabling it'. This goes-in-hand to a point I make in my book; *Democracy Promotion and Conflict-based Reconstruction: The United States and Democratic Consolidation in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq*. In talking about the 'Axis of Evil', I argue that Iraq's 'pariah status' and lack of international allies made it a 'perfect opportunity for the Bush administration to confirm to the world that the US was changing the 'rules of the game'' (Hill 2011: 174). And it was this lack of allies that gave the neoconservatives an opportunity to re-orient USFP in a more aggressively interventionist manner. Although, it has to be noted that in spite of the Bush administration taking a monumental decision to invade Iraq it was less a rule-changer than the rhetoric of the administration would like it to be. In fact, concerning Iran and North Korea, it was and more a bluff. A bluff because it was unlikely the Bush administration was going to engage with these axis states in the same way. In a cost-benefit analysis it was simply not in its interests.

Moreover, this more aggressive stance was ultimately more backward than forward looking. It considered the problems of force projection in the Middle East without considering the negative implications of interventionism on the future international political landscape. In my calculations, it is questionable whether the neoconservative idea of a burgeoning democracy at the heart of the Middle East influencing the future political path of the region was more than just rhetoric to propel a more narrowly defined acquisition of national interests. Irrespective of one's opinion in this matter, what cannot be disputed are the dangerous implications this invasion had on the relative roles of regional Middle East players and the impact this power-dispute had on the stability of the international system as we know it. This temporary instability perpetuated by a series of oppositional forces to the US power-predominance in the international arena enabled states such as Iran and North Korea to be pro-active in redefining their roles. This redefinition included Iranian sponsored terrorism in Iraq, and North Korea testing a nuclear bomb.

Collins then concludes that 'more minimal forms of intervention should appear to be back on the table' and thus, I assume, should subsequently be included as a future US strategy towards Iran and North Korea. This recession-sized intervention was possible by the US and other NATO allies in Libya (principally because of the lack of domestic and international political will to engage in another costly full-scale intervention) as it, like Iraq, was a pariah state with no major allies (except the ones that ganged up against it, again similar to Saddam's Iraq) but can this strategy be applied to other cases? What conditions determine a liberal-lite intervention? I wonder though, whether this is another example of a bluff by another US administration to argue for a general strategy of intervention when in fact it is only applicable to cases with a very specific set of circumstances. Without answering these questions can we realistically consider liberal-lite interventionism as a general policy?

About the author:

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Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.