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US Policy of Regime Change: Interplay of Systemic Constraints, Leaders' Perceptions, and Domestic Pressures

Abstract

How are the systemic constraints transformed through the transmission belt of leader's idiosyncrasies and domestic pressures in order to result in the outcome, which is the pursuance or non-pursuance of regime change policy by the United States? This study analyses the foreign policy decision making of President Bush vis-à-vis Iraq, President Obama vis-à-vis Libya, and President Trump vis-à-vis Iran. It raises the following questions: What is the US policy of regime change, and why and how has it pursued this policy? Why were the US policies different in Iraq, Libya, and Iran, and what have been the implications of these policies upon the region as a whole? While using neoclassical realism as the theoretical paradigm and using qualitative content analysis, this study hypothesizes that the interplay of systemic and domestic level variables results in the foreign policy outcomes in the form of action or inaction towards a particular issue.

Key Words: Regime Change, Systemic Constraints, Domestic Pressure, Leaders' Idiosyncrasies, United States, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Bush, Obama, Trump

Introduction

In order to achieve its geo-economic and geostrategic interests, the United States has practised regime change policy – by overt or covert foreign interventions, meddling in elections of foreign lands, sponsoring coup d'états – in almost every region of the world. It has been involved in favouring and installing friendly regimes in Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Haiti, Iran, and many other states through most of the twentieth century. 9/11 attacks furthered the US 'will' to pursue regime change policy against the states perceived as threatening US core national interests. Moreover, in the garb of exporting liberal values – by pursuing “freedom agenda” (Sullivan, 2004) – the US has been working for the democratization of the Middle East. Bush administration declared Iran, Iraq and North Korea as “Axis of Evil” (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007) and went for regime change in Iraq. Obama administration, on the other hand, showed strategic restraint and let allies take the lead in changing the Qaddafi regime in Libya. Bush adopted a more hawkish policy towards Iraq, while the Obama administration relied more upon its allies. While perceiving the United States as a global power and acting as a leader of the world, President Bush adopted a more expansive policy regarding regime change in Iraq. President Obama, on the other hand, understood the limitations of the global role of the US and adopted a restrained policy. President Trump, though overtly a hawkish leader, avoided entangling the United States in wars overseas and focus more on making America great again. John Bolton's entry into the Trump administration reinvigorated the debate about regime change, specifically in Iran, yet sensing his schemas, President Trump removed him from National Security Advisor's position (Walt, 2018).

This study intends to find answers to the questions; What is the US policy of regime change, and why and how has it pursued this policy? Why were the US policies different in Iraq, Libya, and Iran and what have been the implications of these policies upon the region as a whole? The study, while making use of neoclassical realism as the theoretical paradigm, hypothesizes that the interplay of systemic and domestic level variables results in the foreign policy outcomes in the form of action or inaction towards a particular issue.

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Neoclassical realism investigates that how national interest is defined in a given state at a particular time, how perceptions and belief of leaders and their ability to take decision plays role in conceptualizing the national interest depending upon the level of autonomy they enjoy in the national system (Rose, 1998). Neo-classical realists believe that “over the long run a state’s foreign policy cannot transcend the limits and opportunities thrown by the international environment”. Neo-classical realism believes that the perception of leaders and the elite about the relative power of the state plays a major role in the decision-making process. This theory explains that the systemic stimuli are translated through the transmission belt of the domestic variables in order to cause the dependent variable, which is the foreign policy outcome (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016; Rose, 1998).

The US Policy of Regime Change

Why do great powers pursue a policy of regime change? States attempt to change other states’ regime to impose their ideology; increase their power or influence over other states; to maintain dominance in their area of influences; to gain access to natural resources, for instance, oil; to ensure the hassle-free movement in the trade routes; to counter the threats posed by the regime, such as support of terrorism; and to bring a favourable regime in power. Through most of the twentieth century, the United States continued to increase its relative power in the international system with the aim to maintain its supremacy around the globe – it employed several strategies such as invasions, military coups, assassinations, constitution manipulation, election tempering, and providing aid to fulfil political motives (Sullivan, 2004). Article 2(1)-(5) of the United Nations Charter notes, “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations” (UN, 1945). The United States, on the contrary, have intervened covertly or overtly in other states using multiple pretexts. It has been active in changing or influencing regimes in Latin America, the Caribbean, East Asia, Middle East, and the Pacific region. It tried to bring regime change in Cuba through the Bay of Pigs landing in 1961, supported dirty Argentinean war, supported Ramon Magsaysay in quelling communist guerrillas in 1953 and later supporting him for being the president of the Philippines, supported Christian parties win crucial elections in Lebanon in 1957 using briefcases full of cash (Tharoor, 2016).

Before the Truman administration, the United States had little interest in the Middle East, but during the Second World War, its troops were stationed in Iran for securing Iranian oil and helping the Soviet forces therein. By the end of the Second World War, the US tried to extend its influence in the Middle Eastern region. Anglo Iranian oil crisis prompted Great Britain to approach the United States in 1952 with the proposal for a coup d’état in Iran (Department of State, 1952). In 1953 Dwight Eisenhower became the US president and gave the go-ahead to Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for orchestrating the coup and replacing democratically elected Prime Minister Mosaddeq and restore the power of Reza Shah Pahlavi (Byrne, 2013). During the 1980s Reagan administration continued to try to bring regime change in Libya by accusing its leader Muammar Qaddafi of sponsoring terrorism. Reagan called him the “mad dog of the Middle East” (Moravcsik, 2007), and Secretary of State Alexander Haig considered Gaddafi a “cancer that has to be removed” (Hersh, 1987). In response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the passing of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 678, the United States deployed forces to liberate Kuwait (UNSC, 1990). Several neoconservatives considered that instead of limiting the operation, the United States should have gone for regime change in Iraq.

Bush Administration’s Regime Change Policy vis-à-vis Iraq

In 2003, the United States was successful in bringing regime change in Iraq through invasion. Saddam’s Iraq was perceived as a permanent threat by the United States. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in late November 2001, directed General Tommy Franks to begin preparations for Iraq War (Battle, 2010). Rumsfeld, even before the 9/11 attacks, noted on July 27, 2001, that “If Saddam’s regime were ousted, we would have a much-improved position in the region and elsewhere” (Rumsfeld, 2001). So, these were not the 9/11 attacks that brought Iraq into the limelight; instead, several members of the Bush administration had already been planning for the regime change in Iraq.

The US prepares for the Iraq War

When Saddam Hussain invaded Iran in the 1980s, the United States resorted to relations with Iraq that had been suspended since 1967. It provided aid to Iraq to ensure its security against Iran. Donald Rumsfeld visited Iraq and met with high-ranking officials to offer US support. Their relations deteriorated in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, prompting the international community to launch the first Gulf War. After the war, the United Nations imposed severe sanctions upon Iraq with the objective to prevent it from developing non-traditional weapons. Americans had been thinking of using the sanctions as a tool to instigate a rebellion against Saddam Hussain, but they failed. Ahmad Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), with the help of the Clinton administration, tried to launch a coup against Saddam Hussain in 1995. It failed ([Hersh, 2001](#)). Donald Rumsfeld later reused several parts of Chalabi's end game schema while planning the 2003 Iraq War. President Clinton in 1998 signed the Iraq Liberation Act that noted: "it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq" ([Gilman, 1998](#)). When President Bush entered the White House, neoconservatives, who long have been supporting the regime change in Iraq, attained several important positions. Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, the two most prominent neoconservatives, worked as Bush's political consultants. Besides them, Bush assigned large number of the hawks for Iraq to important positions, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and Douglas Feith. Most of them have already established good relationship with Ahmad Chalabi ([Woodward, 2012](#)). These neoconservatives supported a proactive foreign policy to; enhance US dominance in global affairs, promote US exceptionalism, its responsibility to promote democracy, peace and freedom, and protect the US national interest by any means possible ([Davidson, 2009](#)). Merely three days after Bush's inauguration, Colin Powell was approached about the policy of regime change in Iraq ([Department of State, 2001a](#)).

Pre-emption and the Just war: Building Rationale to go for War in Iraq

Pre-emption has become an important part of the US policy response to the external threats posed by states and non-state actors. "Pre-emption, defined as the anticipatory use of force in the face of an imminent attack, has long been accepted as legitimate and appropriate under international law ... It now encompasses preventive war as well, in which force may be used even without evidence of an imminent attack to ensure that a serious threat to the United States does not 'gather' or grow over time" ([Steinberg, O'Hanlon, & Rice, 2002](#)). Bush administration tried to make pre-emptive war in Iraq a just war by trying to fulfil its seven principles, i.e., war being the last option, having just cause, declared by legitimate authority, having right intentions, sound chance of success, openness to peaceful resolution during the war, and proportionality in terms of means used ([Bureau of Intelligence and Assessment, 2002](#)). In the ideal sense, pre-emption necessitates that the one who launches war must provide ample proof of the outlandish and unacceptable behaviour of the adversary while also exhausting all other options for the resolution of the conflict.

Bush administration declared pre-emption against rogue regimes and terrorist groups as its official policy in NSS 2002. It notes, "While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defence by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country" ([Bush, 2002a](#)). Bush administration had already been planning about regime change in Iraq. 9/11 attacks provided it with the rationale for pre-emption.

In order to create a rationale for the attack, the Bush administration linked terrorism with authoritarianism ([Bush, 2002a](#)). The objective was to promote democracy in the world – a moral ambition of the United States as is enunciated by several of its presidents through most of the 20th century. Helping friendly middle eastern states, reshaping geopolitical contours of the Middle East, eliminating enemies, and promoting of democracy in the region were the prime reasons for the US intervention ([Gordon, 2003](#)). 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review specifically talks about regime change in other states in order to protect the interests of the United States and of its allies ([Department of State, 2001b](#)). Regime change in Iraq could not have been done interiorly since the US experience of fomenting a rebellion had already failed. So, the most feasible option now left was the military intervention in order to achieve the US objectives therein. The issue of Iraqi development of weapons

of mass destruction and the threat of those weapons falling into terrorists' hands provided the immediate reason for the intervention ([Gordon, 2003](#)). Besides, US strategic presence in the Middle East would have allowed it to challenge and counter any threat emerging from the region.

Bush had declared Iraq part of the 'Axis of Evil' because of its alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, killing its own citizens, and posing a potent threat to the US interests ([Bush, 2002b](#)). This helped in the development of the conception of a 'rogue regime', having the following characteristics; trying to develop weapons of mass destruction, sponsoring terrorism, posing a threat to its own citizens, and challenging the interest of the United States and its allies. Saddam regime was presented as a rogue regime, which was posing a threat to its neighbours, the US interests, and even to its own population.

US' Iraq Invasion and its Aftermaths

After removing the Taliban regime from Afghanistan, the Bush administration practically started preparing for regime change in Iraq. With the invasion of Iraq, it intends to destroy presumed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), free the public of Iraq, guarantee abundant oil supply, and remove a regime that remains a staunch opponent of other Middle Eastern monarchies ([Gaddis, 2002](#)). However, after the invasion, no traces of WMDs were found, thus falsifying Colin Powell's statements in the United Nations Security Council. As far as oil was concerned, the initial objective of the US was to build infrastructure in Iraq for oil production, starting with 2 million barrels a day, and in the long run, to reach sustainable oil production of 5 million barrels a day ([Chow, 2003](#)). A transitional Iraqi Security Force was constituted to fill the vacuum created by the US dismantling of the Iraqi military ([Barton & Crocker, 2003](#)). Post Saddam Iraq proved that the US preparations for fighting a lengthy war and going for the nation- and state-building in Iraq were very weak. Several militia groups soon started the war against the new Iraqi government and the foreign forces, leading to the loss of thousands of innocents' lives. Neoconservatives might have behaved in a too innocent manner to think that the Iraqi people – especially the majority Shi'ite community – will continue to see Americans as their liberators.

Obama Administration and Regime Change in Libya

Libya had been ruled by Muammar Qaddafi since 1969. During Arab Spring, a series of anti-government protests broke out against him, starting in February 2011 from Benghazi to the capital Tripoli – the protests later turned into civil war. On March 17, 2011, UNSC approved a no-fly zone over Libya while demanding to take 'all necessary measures to save Libyan citizens ([UNSC, 2011b](#)). Soon Operation Unified Protector started against the Gaddafi regime that ultimately crumbled in August 2011, leaving the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the *de facto* Libyan government with the UN acknowledgement. Qaddafi was caught and executed in October 2011 by the rebels ("[Gaddafi Killed by NTC Forces in Battle for Sirte," 2011](#)).

Arab Spring to the Regime Change in Libya

Arab Spring started in Tunisia and soon engulfed several Arab states. Peaceful protests started in Libya on February 15, 2011, with the demand for improved civil and political rights, but ultimately turned violent and spread throughout the state ([Bellamy & Williams, 2011](#)). Within a couple of days of the beginning of the crisis in Libya, International Criminal Court (ICC) sent signals to the Qaddafi regime of its excesses in crushing the movement and considering it a crime against humanity. United Nations Security Council soon passed two resolutions; UNSCR 1970, which imposed 'an arms embargo, a travel ban and an asset freeze in connection with the situation in Libya ([UNSC, 2011a](#)); and UNSCR 1973, which approved a 'no-fly zone' over Libya ([UNSC, 2011c](#)). Resolutions also froze the assets of the Qaddafi regime and led to the 'Responsibility to Protect' mission in Libya. Subsequently, NATO started aerial strikes on Libya.

It is now believed that the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle was abused, as the UNSC resolution, 1973 did not approve of the regime change in Libya. NATO breached the arms embargo by effectively providing weapons to the rebels while also sending 'boots on the ground' ostensibly for training the rebels, a clear disregard of the UN resolutions ([Wang, Beckett, & Kusnetz, 2011](#)). NATO

fired more than 200 cruise missiles and 20,000 bombs in Libya, which focussed military as well as non-military targets on helping the rebel forces - at times, list of the targets being provided by the rebels themselves ([Pugliese, 2012](#)).

The question arises that why did the great powers go for regime change in Libya, whence the Libyan government had already started its outreach to the western states. In fact, Libya sits on the vital crossing point of European, African, and Middle Eastern states. Besides, Libya's low-sulphur crude is extremely significant in the geoeconomics sense.

Moreover, Libyan intervention was not just about the protection of human rights; it was additionally about the advancement of neoliberal values through regime change. Such a neoliberal push undermines the idea that securing people was the prime motive for NATO's intervention because NATO looked another way when their supported rebels committed gross human rights violations ([Igwe, Abdullah, Kirmanj, Fage, & Bello, 2017](#)). When intervention took place in Libya, it was contended that the political situation of Libya is really weak. It could easily have been foreseen that Qaddafi's removal would launch a series of events leading to the instigation of tribal rivalries, from whence radical religious groups could have flourished. Libya now divided into several parts; the eastern and central Libya being ruled by General Khalifa Haftar, the western part led by the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), and the Southern part controlled by several tribal militias and religious extremist groups ([Fitzgerald & Toaldo, 2016](#)).

President Obama, as compared with President Bush, was aware of the limits of the American power and was wary of going for a military solution to the complex problems – yet he was ready to use the military when core interests of the United States are at stake ([Walt, 2016](#)). His administration's prime focus remained “nation-building at home” ([Walt, 2016](#)). Internationally, he focussed on strengthening alliances and showing strategic restraint in the international crises. His views about interventions included maintaining a fragile balance between duty and obligation that the US has as the leader of the free world to deal with the disorder and war abroad. Yet, he opted for a diplomatic solution to the problems and relying more upon the US allies to deal with the complex geopolitical and geostrategic situations ([CBSN, 2016](#)). In the case of Libya, Obama showed strategic restraint and let American allies take the lead in bombarding Libya ([Walt, 2016](#)). The ultimate objective of his policy remained regime change in Libya, but an objective to be achieved with minimum cost to the United States and more reliance upon the alliance partners. By adopting this approach, President Obama was able to avoid entangling the United States in another long and lengthy war – it seems that the lessons learnt during the Iraq war played a crucial role in the decision-making process during the Libyan crisis.

Trump Administration and the US Policy towards Iran

Donald Trump, during the election campaign, clearly disagreed with the approach adopted by President Obama vis-à-vis Iran. President Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the P5+1 - Iran nuclear deal – thus fulfilling one of his campaign promises and reimposed stricter sanctions against Iran. He considered JCPOA to be one of the most terrible agreements ever made by the United States ([Preble, 2018](#)). He proposed that the deal is faulty and does not deal with the Iranian ballistic missile program, nor deals with the Iranian support of the militant groups throughout the region. He claimed that he was ready to re-negotiate a new deal instead of upgrading the Obama era deal. He forwarded 12 demands, as enumerated by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, on May 21, 2018, including ([AJ, 2018](#)); Iran was necessitated to stop nuclear enhancement, end the multiplication of ballistic missiles, give the International Atomic Energy Agency unconditional access to all locales throughout the state. In return, Pompeo said that the US would be ready to end the important segments of sanctions upon Iran.

Though President Trump time and again supported regime change in Iran but was interested in stoking a domestic rebellion and not foreign intervention. The appointment of John Bolton to the office of National Security Advisor prompted the commentators to claim that one of the biggest supporters of regime change policy of the United States, especially vis-à-vis Iran, is at the helm of the affairs now ([Borger, 2019](#)). During his time in office, several mysterious and successive military face-offs transpired between Iran and the United States and its allies. In 2015 he had penned an opinion piece in the New York Times suggesting that there is only one way to prevent Iran's bomb, and that is

to bomb Iran ([Bolton, 2015](#)). Everyone was expecting that military intervention and a forceful regime change in Iran is in the offing. ([Borger, 2019](#)) But President Trump, realizing the sensitivity of the issue, remove Bolton unceremoniously ([Haltiwanger, 2019](#)), thus putting cold waters to the wishes of the interventionists. It does not imply that President Trump is not in support of the regime change in Iran, only that he is not ready to commit American forces to intervene militarily in Iran. US Department of State, under Trump, even declared the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a terrorist organization ([Wroughton & Hafezi, 2019](#)). On December 27, 2019, an attack in Kirkuk (Iraq) resulted in the killing and wounding of several US citizens and Iraqis – the US accused Iran supported Kataib Hezbollah militia group of orchestrating the attack. On August 29th, the US responded by attacking several installations attached with Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria. While announcing the ‘successful attacks’, on December 30, 2019, Mark Esper, US Secretary of Defense, stated that “we will take additional actions as necessary to ensure that we act in our self-defence and we deter further bad behavior from militia groups or from Iran” ([Ali & Rasheed, 2019](#)). On the very next day a group of militants tried to enter the US embassy in Bagdad, for which the United States again accused Iran of sponsoring the act ([D. J. Trump, 2019](#)). The United States responded by launching an attack and killing General Qassem Soleimani ([D. J. Trump, 2020](#)) – a prominent actor in the Iranian politics who was a leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Al-Quds Force and remained prominently engaged in the Syrian war against ISIS. In retaliation Iran launched several ballistic missiles that targeted US troops stationed in Iraq ([Javad Zarif, 2020](#)) and also resulted in accidental downing of Ukraine International Airline flight-752, killing 176 passengers, half of them being Iranians. Interestingly Trump administration responded with threatening statements yet avoided escalating the issue. It seems that President Trump has realized regime change in Iran through military means is not a better option in the case of Iran, and supported the rebellious domestic behaviour, as was done in the 1950s against Prime Minister Mosaddeq – Secretary of State Mike Pompeo encouraged protesters, who were protesting against the Iranian government, and said they support Iranian people ([Pompeo, 2020](#)). President Trump has also expressed his support to the Iranian people ([D. J. Trump, 2020](#)). In its response Iran’s Supreme leader Khamenei tweeted that the US is showing its support for the so that it can stab them in heart with the venomous daggers ([Khamenei.ir, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

The United States pursued regime change policy through most of its modern history by orchestrating the overthrow of the regimes considered unfriendly through supporting rebellious domestic groups or directly intervening militarily. This study analyzed the regime change policies of Presidents Bush, Obama, and Trump. The three presidents adopted a different approach towards regime change policy because of the systemic pressures, domestic constraints, and, most importantly, their personal idiosyncrasies. Bush administration was dominated by a group of neoconservatives who have been campaigning and planning for regime change in Iraq since the 1990s. Besides, President Bush was dealing with a crisis situation, which gave him more leverage over the foreign policy decision making process with a minimum possible domestic string attached ([Mirza, 2018](#)). President Obama inherited the United States, which was wary of the fighting wars abroad. Americans were demanding him to ‘bring back the boys’ –one of his major campaign promises. The international environment was not as conducive for the United States as it was in the aftermaths of the 9/1 attacks. The outpour of sympathy for the United States had gone by now, and it was increasingly looked at as a state bent upon an imperial agenda. In such circumstances, as the theory of neoclassical realism dictates, his policy choices were constrained. It was no more crisis situation implying that the public opinion and other domestic actors and factors were quite successful in influencing the foreign policy decision-making process. Above all, Obama himself was reluctant to engage American troops in another war – he even did not act decisively in the Syrian crisis leading Russia to intervene first. He showed strategic restraint and let American allies take the lead in the regime change operation vis-à-vis Libya. Though President Trump looks like a hawk in the foreign policy circles, yet he had declared that he will not engage the American soldiers in unnecessary wars and will focus upon ‘making American great again’ – an agenda specifically focussed upon domestic issues. Though he did not like the Iranian regime, yet he knew the limits and red-lines of American behaviour, and when he realized that his own National Security

Advisor John Bolton is making grounds to cross the red lines, he removed him. He is considered a Jacksonian president, focusing on domestic politics, populism, and avoided unnecessary military engagements while at the same time never shying away from using ruthless military force when required ([Baker, 2017](#); [Clarke & Ricketts, 2017](#); [Mead, 2016](#)).

So, three presidents' regime change policies were determined by their idiosyncrasies, systemic pressures, and domestic constraints. The study also found that the 9/11 attacks reinvigorated the debate about pursuing regime change policy by the United States, yet the US continued to pursue this policy through most of the 20th century in order to achieve its geostrategic and geopolitical interests. Regime change policy in Iraq backfired, especially after the discovery that Iraq neither developed nor was developing weapons of mass destruction. This damaged the American trust in the international system, especially among its allies. President Obama's decision to withdraw the bulk of the troops from Iraq created a vacuum, which was exploited by ISIS – that emerged in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis.

The role played by the US as a major power to promote peace and security is appreciated, but it is also a reality that major power has its own limitations. As the Bush administration's image of the United States was as a state that is responsible for removing threats and promoting democracy, yet Obama administration perceived that it is important to take partners along and, at times letting them lead. President Trump, unusually, has remained committed to not entangling the United States in others' wars and successfully steered the United States away from an impending crisis with Iran.

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