

**DEFYING THE HEGEMON:
Syria and the Iraq War**

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"Mr. President, what do you fear most these days?"

"The thought of this armed America that today behaves as a superpower without vision. (Interview with Bashar al-Asad in "La Repubblica (Rome) 28 February 2005)

The US invasion of Iraq precipitated a US-Syrian crisis. On one side, an implacable hegemon seems determined to carry out regime change in a smaller state. Arab nationalism, in Syria (as in Iraq), is widely denounced in certain Washington circles as an evil ideology that must be confronted. On the other hand, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's defiance of Washington over the Iraq war, in the name of this very ideology, stands in striking contrast to the appeasement of Washington practised by every other Arab leader.

The Syrian-US case provides insight into post-Cold War world order and particularly core-periphery relations. It has implications for the explanatory power of IR theories, especially realism. Thus, while both hegemonic stability theory and realism expect the hegemon to act as a stabilizing "off-shore balancer," the Iraq war and crisis with Syria calls this into question. While both realism and structuralism expect small states such as Syria to bandwagon with the hegemon, Syria appears to have done the opposite. Finally, the case can throw light on nature of the post-Cold war order, particularly, the debates between the realist view of the world as a anarchy and the structuralist view of it as a hierarchy and between materialists who see power as shaping--and using--norms and those who see norms as constraining power.

Syria and the US: an empirical survey

The decline in US--Syrian relations can be attributed to five factors: 1) the collapse of the Arab-Israeli (and Syrian-Israeli) peace process; 2) the rise of the neo-cons in Washington; 3) the September 11 events; 4) Syrian alignment with Iraq, and 5) Syrian resistance to the US war on Iraq--which put relations seemingly beyond repair, with Washington subsequently coming to seek not a change in Syrian behaviour but a change in regime.

Syria's pre-Iraq war foreign policy tangent and the US

Syria's state formation, particularly the dismemberment of historic Syria and the Zionist colonization of Palestine, generated a powerful sense of Arab identity and irredentism in Syria and put the country on an Arab nationalist foreign policy tangent that endured through countless leadership changes. The loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 war further locked Syria into a struggle with Israel to recover this territory, first in the 1973 war and when this failed in a proxy war in Lebanon chiefly meant to strengthen Syria's hand in a negotiated recovery of the lost territory.

In this struggle, the US has been perceived as the main backer of Syria's Israeli antagonist, yet also the one state that could restrain Israel and, if it thought it in its interest, conceivably broker an Syrian-Israeli settlement in which Syria would recover the Golan. As such, Damascus traditionally sought to convince Washington that its presumed interest in

Middle East stability would be served by such a settlement by demonstrating to Washington that if Syria's interests in such a settlement were accommodated it could be a factor for regional stability congruent with US interests; conversely, if they were ignored Syria would obstruct US initiatives. Thus, Hafiz foiled several attempts of the US to engineer separate peace treaties between Israel and Lebanon and Jordan that excluded Syria. The latter risky option required Syria seek shelter in various alliances--Arab, Iranian, and in Soviet protection, reinforced by a modest non-conventional "deterrent capability" which maintained stability on the Syrian-Israeli border --in a word, a certain "balancing" against US and Israeli power. Hafiz used a combination of limited force by proxies and diplomacy to bargain with superior powers in advancing Syrian national interests with such success that Syria was, despite its limited base of national power, seen to "punch above its weight" in regional and international politics.

However, as the end of the Cold War removed the option to balance between the superpowers, Syria began to "bandwagon" with the US hegemon, partly in order to balance the greater threat from Israel: specifically, it joined the 1990 anti-Iraq coalition and thereafter the Madrid peace process in the expectation that, in return for Arab support in the Gulf war, the US would broker an acceptable settlement of Arab-Israeli conflict that would enable Syria to recover the Golan in return for peace with Israel.¹ Syria made a "strategic decision" for peace, entered direct negotiations with Israel for the first time, and made several concessions to Israel over demilitarised zones and normalisation of relations;² at the same time, however, it used Hizbollah to keep military pressure on Israel in southern Lebanon, conveying the message that Israel could not have peaceful borders while occupying Arab (southern Lebanon but also the Golan) territory.

Simultaneously, the stagnation of Syria's state-dominated economy, as oil prices and foreign aid to Syria declined from the late eighties, undermined the economic base of the regime, and was seen to require an influx of (chiefly Arab and expatriate) investment which the regime sought through incremental economic liberalisation. No such economic revival would be forthcoming without a peace settlement that would give investors confidence and allow the dismantling of the national security state to which the economy was subordinated. In anticipation of a peace settlement, Syria was gearing up for major economic reform in the late 1990s. But it must be stressed that, by contrast to other Arab states, Syria, with oil, food self-sufficiency, no dependence on foreign investment and no significant debt to the West, had, up to this time, retained its economic sovereignty and Hafiz al-Asad had consistently subordinated economic to geopolitical imperatives in his foreign policy.

It was widely expected that the convergence of opportunities and pressures peaking in the late nineties, might make the leadership change at the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in 2000, the watershed that released pent-up pressures for radical change in Syria. Bashar al-Asad was seen as representative of a new generation with a vision of "modernisation" which entailed deepened economic liberalisation, a reduction of rent-seeking corruption, and an gradual integration of Syria into the world market. Indeed, the centrepiece of Bashar's foreign policy was initially a strategic opening to Europe; his first visits abroad were to Western European capitals, not Syria's old East-bloc allies, and he made the strategic decision to bring Syria into the Euro-Med partnership, an agreement that would require and drive Syrian movement toward a market economy. Bashar had to share power in the regime with his fathers lieutenants, the so-called "old guard" many of which remained wedded to Hafiz's Arab-nationalist foreign policy commitments and the struggle with Israel over the Golan, but which, depending on their calculus of costs and benefits, were not systematically opposed to his new policy of economic liberalisation within and Westward rapprochement without.³

Unfortunately, the external environment for Syrian reform was dramatically soured by the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process (symbolised by the failure of the Clinton-Asad summit of March 2000), the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifadah and the rise of the hard-line Sharon government in Israel. With a peace settlement off the agenda and, with it, the prospect that economic liberalisation might rescue the economy, Bashar's regime opted to

pursue an opening to Iraq which had hitherto been a bitter rival but which was now seeking Syrian co-operation in evading UN sanctions. The Iraqi relation was primarily a matter of geo-economics, meant to secure the resources to stabilise the economy in the short term. Its centerpiece was the reopening at the end of 2000 of the oil pipeline from Iraq to Syria's Mediterranean port of Baniyas that had been closed during the Iran-Iraq war. Damascus was said to receive about 200,000 bpd of Basra Light crude from Iraq at below market prices (thought to be around \$10-15 per barrel), enabling it to then export an equivalent amount of Syrian Light crude at much higher international prices. The pipeline produced perhaps \$1 billion/year in revenue for the government, about 5 percent of Syria's gross domestic product. In addition, Syrian business coveted the prospects of monopolies over the Iraqi market and sought to establish a foothold there at a time when an end to the Iraq sanctions regime seemed on the horizon. This was a decisive factor in starting Syria on a collision course with the United States.

US Policy in the Middle East and the Decline of US-Syrian Relations

US policy in the Middle East historically balanced two potentially contradictory interests, securing access to oil at "reasonable prices" through alliances with Arab clients (above all swing producer Saudi Arabia) and support for Israel--which antagonized the Arab world.⁴ Washington attempted to resolve the contradictions in its policy through the pursuit of an Arab-Israeli peace process entailing a compromise in which Israel would evacuate the occupied territories in return for peace treaties and normalization of relations with the Arab states. The US was, however, handicapped in brokering the peace process by the ever-rising influence of the Zionist lobby which led Washington to acquiescence in (and provide funding which made possible) Israel's continued illegal colonisation (in violation of the Geneva convention) of the very occupied territories that had to be the basis of a compromise peace settlement.

As long as the US sought to secure its interests through brokering of the peace process, Syria was seen as a pivotal state that should be engaged. Except under Reagan, US administrations since Nixon accepted the conventional wisdom propounded by Kissinger that the Arabs could not make war without Egypt (whose neutralization he secured) and could not make peace without Syria. A Syrian-Israeli peace was seen as decisively bolstering the forces of moderation in the region while completing the "circle of peace" around Israel. Outstanding issues of contention between the US and Syria (terrorism, WMDs) were thought to be resolvable within the framework of a Syrian-Israeli settlement since they were all "cards" Syria sought to play in the on-going struggle over the terms of the settlement.⁵ In the nineties, as Syria came very close to reaching a settlement with Israel brokered by Washington's intensive third party mediation, US-Syrian relations were excellent. However, the peace process ultimately collapsed and even though this was largely owing to the unwillingness of Israel Prime Minister Barak to follow through on Israel's commitments to total withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and of Clinton to hold him to them,⁶ the collapse was blamed on Syria and interrupted the US-Syrian engagement that had paralleled the peace process. Once Bush and the neo-cons came to power, the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict ceased to be a priority and Syria ceased to be seen as a US partner in the peace process and instead as a threat to Israel.

Another factor that led to the souring of relations was that even as the new Bush administration sought to isolate Iraq (preparing the ground for possible regime change even before 9/11), Syria's deepened ties with Baghdad and receipt of Iraqi oil outside the UN oil-for-food regime became a bone of contention, even though the US had approved similar arrangements for its Turkish and Jordanian allies. US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus and mistakenly believed that he had obtained Bashar's agreement to put the proceeds from Iraqi oil in UN escrow accounts; when this did not happen Powell professed to find Bashar untrustworthy.⁷ The Syrians also made co-operation with Washington's proposed "smart sanctions" against Iraq contingent on "firm positions regarding the Israeli aggression

against the Arabs." Syria did not want to defy the US, which it needed to contain and deal with Israel, and it was risky to be seen outside "international legitimacy" (the Iraq sanctions regime). But Syria hoped to make the price of co-operation in keeping Iraq isolated, at the expense of its own economic interests in Iraqi ties, significant.⁸ Moreover, it appears Syria saw Iraq as yet another "card" with which it could try to re-engage the US in brokering a settlement with Israel.

Decisive in the decline of US-Syrian relations was the rise to power in the Bush government of the so-called "neo-cons" and their hawkish patrons (Cheney and Rumsfeld) who advocated a sharp departure from traditional US policy toward the Arabs, including Syria. The neo-cons, intimately tied to Israel's rightwing Likud party, supported Israel's policy of colonization in the occupied territories in pursuit of "Greater Israel"; since this obstructed a peace settlement and endangered the Arab relations on which oil access depended (particularly with Saudi Arabia), they began proposing to cut through this conundrum by the use of America's overwhelming military capability to "change the dynamics of the Middle East." They hit on the idea that the seizure of Iraq's pivotal oil fields would make appeasement of the Arabs (and the Saudi connection) superfluous; moreover, from this Iraqi base, the US could intimidate remaining resistance--from Syria and Iran--to imposition of a pro-Israeli Pax-Americana in the region. Syria, as an obstacle to this plan, was in the neo-con crosshairs even before they came to power: neo-cons such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and David Wurmser had previously advised Israeli PM on Netanyahu to use force against Syria and once in power they would lobby for the use of American power against Damascus.⁹

The events of 11 September gave the "neo-cons" a unique opportunity to paint Israel's foes as America's foes. They used the involvement of Saudis in 9/11 to depict the kingdom as an unreliable ally, even an enemy. They painted a stark new world in which all states that were not in total agreement with the US on issues having to do with "terrorism" were foes. Syria, however tried to take a middle ground. Syria supported the US war on al-Qaida with valuable intelligence assistance, but objected to Washington's tendency to conflate what Syria took to be movements of national resistance to Israeli occupation, notably Hizbollah, with terrorism. Bashar told US officials that America's war in Afghanistan was simply revenge and that an effective war on terrorism meant dealing with the injustice that breeds it, most notably the Israeli occupation of Arab land. Consistent with its "war on terrorism", however, the US became insistent that the Damascus press offices of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, responsible for suicide bombings in Israel, be closed. Syria, which regarded the groups as "cards" in the struggle with Israel and from which it derived some nationalist legitimacy in a period of murderous Israeli repression in the occupied territories, resisted.

Syria's unwillingness to fall in with American demands on terrorism coincided with the new doctrine in Washington that any state that was believed to support "terrorism" and to have WMDs was an immediate threat to the US itself against which Washington was entitled to wage preventive war. Syria could be construed to fall into this category and neo-cons David Wurmser, in the office the Vice President and John Bolton in the State Department, made concerted efforts to paint Syria as a threat comparable to Iraq. While US moderates in the State Department and CIA were sceptical about aggressively confronting a state whose president was a pro-Western reformer and which was proving a useful ally in the "war on terrorism" (by providing intelligence that had helped thwart attacks on Americans), the neo-cons seemed determined to destroy common ground between Syria and the US, isolate Damascus diplomatically, and deploy economic sanctions and military threats to bring down the regime.¹⁰

The US determination to invade Iraq was the immediate catalyst of a deterioration in US-Syrian relations that enabled the neo-cons to get the upper hand over the official moderates. At the UN and in the Arab League, Syrian diplomacy attempted to build a coalition to block or at least withhold legitimation from a US invasion. Yet Syria, keen not to be isolated from "international legitimacy" voted for UNSC 1441, mandating the renewal of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq, in the hope this might deprive the neo-cons of their excuse for war. On the eve of war, Syrian foreign minister, Farouk al-Sharaa told parliament

that the US was going to war in defiance of international law and the UN and that Syria had a national interest in the defeat of the invaders. Syria's Grand Mufti, Ahmad Kaftaru, urged Muslims throughout the world "to use all means and martyrdom operations to defeat the American, British, and Zionist aggression on Iraq." Some half a million Syrians protested the impending invasion in Damascus.¹¹ Bashar, in a famous interview with *al-Safir*, observed: "No doubt the U.S. is a super-power capable of conquering a relatively small country, but...the U.S. and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq."¹² This was widely interpreted in Washington to put Syria on the wrong side of the "with us or against us" dictum laid down by the Bush regime.

Syria did little to actually oppose the US invasion and to the extent it did, acted covertly, half-heartedly, and quickly backed away under US threats. Security barons close to Bashar allegedly facilitated pre-invasion sales of arms to Iraq which, although meant for Iraqi self-defense, were considered to be illegitimate in Washington (and helped the neo-con's discredit the moderates' belief in Bashar as a reformer).¹³ Expecting that Iraqis would defend the regime for months, Syria allowed the movement of volunteers (officially discouraging it, yet, tacitly giving it the green light or even facilitating it) to Iraq to join the resistance. The regime was unwilling to stand against the tide of anti-American fury that swept Syria and though the thousands of volunteers came from all over the Arab world, many were from northern Syria with its close ties to Iraq, concentration of Muslim militants and border tribes that were extensions of those fighting the occupation in Iraq.¹⁴ Once the Saddamist regime fell, Syria also gave refuge to some Iraqi officials fleeing Iraq.

As the neo-cons' star rose amidst Washington's initial military successes in Iraq, they seemed on the verge of using Syria's hostility to this venture to get support for a military attack on Syria. Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Feith launched a campaign of accusations against Syria. The US bombed the Syrian trade centre in Baghdad and shut down the revenue-earning Iraqi oil pipeline to Syria. Bush, asked whether US forces would invade Syria, answered that "Each situation will require a different response, first things first; we expect co-operation from Syria."¹⁵ Under US threat, Syria closed its four official border posts with Iraq on 5 April 2003 and expelled some former Iraqi officials to Iraq where they were captured. Syria was however, initially unwilling to either deploy troops to police its 500 mile border or to dissipate its legitimacy through repression of the centres of resistance recruitment in the north of Syria. However, US sources acknowledged that, although the Syrians "were not going out of their way to stop" the movement of fighters into Iraq, the flow soon slowed to a trickle.¹⁶

Why did Syria give the neo-cons the opportunity to depict it as a foe of the US by its stand on behalf of a regime that was clearly doomed and had a long history of animosity toward Syria? Pundits tend to blame the decision on Bashar's inexperience which they contrast with his father's wily adhesion to America's anti-Iraq coalition in 1991. In fact, Bashar, given his commitment to an economic reform program contingent on integration into the world capitalist market, had a greater incentive to bandwagon than Hafiz in 1990 and had the circumstances been similar he probably would have done so. But in 2003 they were entirely different: if in 1990 Hafiz was given incentives to bandwagon (e.g. a free hand in Lebanon, promise of a vigorous US peace effort), in 2003 the US invasion threatened the economic stake Syria had in Iraq and, while it is hard to know whether Syria would have struck a deal with Washington that would have secured these interests (Colin Powell hinted at a Syrian share in the reconstruction of Iraq), the neo-cons were only offering threats. More important, if in 1991, Iraq was the aggressor against another Arab state, in this instance an Arab state was the victim of aggression by a foreign state, support for which would have been an egregious affront to the Arab nationalist values so ingrained in Syrian thinking. Clearly the regime was pulled in opposing directions: the public outrage at the US invasion --from which the policy process had been insulated under Hafiz's *realpolitik*--now welled up through the fissures in Bashar's regime and made its legitimacy incompatible with submission to American dictates even though the regime's survival seemed to require some accommodation with Washington.

Moreover, the US doctrine of pre-emption, concretised in the invasion of Iraq, in threatening to overturn the very rules of world order and create a jungle where the strong would rule, and pursued in close alliance with Israel, seemed to threaten the Syrian regime's very survival unless it virtually abandoned its Arab nationalist identity and role. Bashar may therefore have calculated that if the US were to encounter significant resistance in Iraq it would be unable to target Syria and would, on the contrary, have to reach a deal with Damascus to stabilise Iraq.

Sandwiched, in the wake of the conquest of Iraq, between Israeli military power in the West and the Americans to the East, the Syrian regime's very survival required it play its few remaining cards with the utmost skill. US Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Damascus with a list of demands on Syria, including expulsion of militant Palestinian factions, dismantling of Hizbollah, withdrawal from Lebanon, and co-operate with the occupation regime in Iraq. These demands struck at Syria's most vital interests--its cards in the struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world. No Syrian government could accede to them except under the direst and most imminent threat. Moreover, American demands were presented in a triumphalist style certain to inflame resistance: Powell told the US press that "there are no illusions in...[Bashar's]mind as to what we are looking for from Syria." A State Department remark ahead of the visit that "We're not coming bringing any carrots" brought foreign ministry spokesperson, Bouthiana Shaaban, to respond that Syria was willing to contribute to regional solutions but could not bear to be dictated to by the US. Co-operation required "real engagement on a parity of dignity."¹⁷ Strindberg reports that diplomats in Damascus believed the US sought to humiliate Syria for its opposition to the war.¹⁸

Issues in the Post-Iraq war US-Syrian Conflict

The Conflict over Iraq

Despite US demands, Syria initially refused to accept the legitimacy of the occupation regime, although under pressures it has, over time partially conceded on this point and, had the US been willing to reach an arrangement, Syria might have been brought fully in line with US effort to stabilise Iraq.

Bashar initially affirmed that Syria had to support the people of Iraq against the US plan to efface its Arab and Muslim character but added: "I do not mean we should support the resistance with weapons. I want to make this point clear so that it will not be misunderstood."¹⁹ Yet soon after the war ended, Syria reached an agreement with US generals in Iraq to provide electricity to northern Iraq in return for allowing Syrian businessmen to re-establish trade with Iraq. Not wanting to be isolated from its Security Council allies at a time when it was under immediate American threat, Syria also reluctantly adhered, albeit after the fact, to UNSC Resolution 1483 which in effect legitimised the occupiers' control of Iraq's oil money. However, Syria refused to recognize the US-installed Iraq Governing Council, and campaigned in vain to prevent other Arab states from doing so; there were conflicts with it and the US over Iraqi funds that had been transferred to Syrian banks before the war, with Syria insisting much of this was payment to Syrian businessmen and that it would only return properly Iraqi assets to a legitimate government;²⁰ (as a result of this, the US would cite the Commercial Bank of Syria as a "primary money-laundering concern," attempting to cut it off from international financial transactions). Yet Syria voted for UN Resolution 1511 in October 2003 that affirmed the Governing Council to embody the sovereignty of Iraq in the transition until an internationally recognised representative government was established and which called on neighbouring states to prevent the transit of "terrorists" to Iraq;²¹ at the same time, though, Syria openly received delegates of Sunni groups overtly opposed to the occupation and the Governing Council. By the end of 2003, as debate raged in Iraq over the transition to self rule, Syria supported those, notably the Shia, demanding elections against the US attempt to manipulate representation to an Iraqi constituent assembly. Syria, Bashar affirmed, would recognize Iraq

when elected and autonomous, not imposed, institutions were in place.²² Yet, keen to get the Iraq government to acknowledge that it needed Syrian co-operation to stabilise the country, (and desiring re-open the Kirkuk-Banyas oil pipeline closed by Washington), it later received interim PM Iyad Allawi and signed a border security agreement with him: Syria's information minister declared that the more the Iraq government liberated itself from American control, the more Syria would cooperate with it.²³ But in May 2005, Syria announced diplomatic ties would be restored with Iraq after a twenty-five year abeyance, although the Iraqi government remained dependent on the occupying forces.

While this ambivalence could reflect incoherence and factionalism in the Syrian leadership, it more likely reflects the contrary impulses buffeting the regime. It is caught between its reluctance to acknowledge the principle of regime change and occupation on the one hand and, on the other hand, its need not to be outside UN legitimacy, its desire to salvage some of its interests in Iraq, and its wish to use the American predicament in Iraq to extract concessions on US-Syrian relations. It is also torn between its revulsion at dealing with what it sees as collaborators working with the Americans and its interest in rebuilding relations with Iraq's rulers, most of whom--the Kurds, Shia and anti-Saddam Ba'athists--it had supported in the Saddam era; alienating them risks the potential that Syrian influence in Iraq could (together with its ally, Iran) counter that of the US.

At the same time, US charges that Syria was facilitating the insurgency remained a continuous thread of contention and occasional engagement with Washington. The neo-cons, put on the defensive by the failure to find non-conventional weapons in Iraq and by the growing resistance to the occupation, sought to divert attention from these failures by blaming Syria. Empirically, we cannot ascertain the extent of Syria's role, with or without its government's connivance, in fuelling the resistance in Iraq. Reportedly 200 Syrian insurgents have been captured in two years of occupation but such foreign fighters make up no more than 3-5% of the total insurgency.

In order to undermine the neo-con drive against it, Syria security has cracked down on the centres of Islamic militancy in Aleppo (confiscating passports, detentions); has taken further measures to seal the border (more troops, berms), has tried to get the US commanders working with Syrian officers on border management and has requested, in vain, that the US provide appropriate surveillance technology. The US military welcomed this stance but cooperation has been regularly squelched by their Pentagon bosses; thus, in December 2004 at a time when the US military reported new Syrian checkpoints and arrests of jihadis, Rumsfeld's response was to accuse Syrian meddling in Iraq of "killing Americans."²⁴ Bashar's orders to secure the border have perhaps only been partially implemented by rival security arms which, for bribes or out of animosity toward the US occupation, may look the other way regarding jihadi activity; there is some evidence, too, that the central government's once-tight control over localities has weakened, providing some space for insurgents to operate on Syrian soil.

As Syria's borders controls tightened during 2004 and it became obvious that there was no large scale movement across it, and indeed, that infiltration via other countries was at least as significant,²⁵ Washington began to claim that, nevertheless, most of the suicide bombers came from Syria (but studies show that over 50% of suicide bombers were Saudi²⁶) and that militant cells inside Iraq drew on "unlimited money" from an underground financial network run by former Baath Party leaders and relatives of Saddam Hussein, many of whom the US had identified as operating from Syria. In February 2005, a half-brother of Saddam Hussein was handed over to the Iraqi authorities and Syria deported to Tunisia and Morocco groups of their nationals involved in smuggling insurgents.²⁷ A telling episode was the US claim that al-Qaida insurgent leader, Zarqawi, had travelled to Syria in April 2004 to meet insurgents based there. Later some US officials covertly let it be known this claim were bogus, based on a single source considered unreliable by intelligence officials but which had been quickly seized upon by the neo-cons.²⁸ In May 2005, there was a major US counter-insurgency operation close to the Syrian border.

Underlining the unrelenting US demands on Syria is, in part, the fact that it can only avoid "imperial overreach" if it gets others to bear part of the burdens of policing the chaos in Iraq, exacerbated by its own dissolution of the Iraqi army and ultimately the responsibility of the occupier. The US seeks to avoid the investment in money and manpower to secure the border by forcing Syria to undertake this task. What distinguishes the US moderates from the hard-liners is that the former would give Syria some incentives to do this while the latter prefer to use threats and coercion, or even to use the issue to demonize the country in preparation for regime change.

WMDs

Another issue bedeviling Syria--US relations, the so-called problem of WMDs, exposes the tactics of the neo-cons, as well as their divergence from the moderates. The neo-con focus on the issue suggests an attempt, not merely to contest specific Syrian policies but to threaten Syria's most vital security interests and indeed to manufacture a Syrian-American crisis. Although Syria's chemically armed missile force is a purely defensive deterrent crucial to its security against a vastly superior nuclear-armed Israeli military; and although, far from posing a threat to anyone, it is a key factor in the balance of power that has maintained two decades of peace on the Syrian-Israel border (as even an Israel analyst has acknowledged),²⁹ neo-con John Bolton repeatedly tried to paint Syrian capabilities as a threat to stability in the Middle East and to the US itself and even accused Syria of harbouring nuclear ambitions. The CIA issued a 35-page rebuttal and Mohammed Baradei, head of the IAEA, declared that there was "no evidence for nuclear activity in Syria,"³⁰ Syria's response to Bolton's charges exposed the double standards at work: it proposed turning the Middle East into a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction under UN supervision. Washington, however, was not interested since, obviously this would put Israeli capabilities on the table; the neo-con aim, from a Syrian perspective, was to force a unilateral disarmament on Syria, leaving it wholly open to Israeli power and vulnerable to an Israeli dictated peace settlement.

Israel and Terrorism:

Underlying neo-con hostility to Syria was ultimately its resistance to the project of "Greater Israel." For example, Syria had used Hizbollah's operations in southern Lebanon to send Israel the message that it could not have peace there and retain the Golan. In opposition to Israeli repression and colonization in the Palestinian territories, Syria allowed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to maintain offices on Syrian territory even though these groups were involved in suicide bombings in Israel. Damascus insisted their offices were not operational command posts but press offices for groups who represented Palestinian Diaspora opinion with a legitimate right to be heard.³¹

Syria seemed willing to incur considerable US hostility to sustain this Arab nationalist stance. To be sure, it soon gave in and closed the militant factions' offices, but evidently the leaders remained in Syria since the factions were deeply entrenched in the refugee camps of Syria and Lebanon. It could or would not stop either the suicide bombings or Hizbollah's indirect support for the Palestinian intifadah. On the other hand, it refrained from opposition to the so-called "road map" to Middle East peace, even though it was excluded at Israel's behest and it appears to have supported efforts to arrange a cease-fire in the Palestinian territories.³² It put Hizbollah under heavy pressure to refrain from challenging Israel in southern Lebanon and, in fact, Hizbollah attacks on the disputed Israeli-occupied Shebaa farms enclave in the south of Lebanon almost ceased.

Meanwhile, however, Israel, on the grounds of Syrian complicity in Hizbollah attacks and Palestinian suicide bombings had taken to experimenting with actual military force against Syria, first on its positions in Lebanon, then with an October 2003 air-raid on an inactive Palestinian training camp outside Damascus which broke the traditional rules on engagement between the two states, and in September 2004 by assassinating a Hamas leader in Damascus.

While most objective observers argued that *both* Israel and its opponents bore responsibility to de-escalate the violence in Palestine and while the US would have once tried to dampen the escalation of the Syrian-Israeli conflict, the US had now totally abandoned the role of an "offshore balancer" and become an open partisan on Israel's side. Bush notoriously pre-judged the shape of (and probably thereby obstructed) a final settlement within Palestine by declaring that Israel was entitled to keep parts of the occupied territories (against international law and UN resolutions). Bush's position on the October 2003 Israeli air-raid was to announce that Israel "must not feel constrained defending the homeland" against terror and to block Syria's efforts to get UNSC condemnation of the attack.³³

Syria's strategy for coping with Washington

Even in the aftermath of the US conquest of Iraq, analysts close to the Syrian regime seemed to believe that Syria could steer a middle way between unrealistic defiance of US power and surrender to its dictates. They argued that Israel was still Syria's real enemy, that US and Israeli interests were not objectively identical and that therefore, a deal with the US was still possible, at least if the power balance should shift to the moderates in Washington. Hence Syria would co-operate with the US where they shared interests, but would refuse US demands that damaged Syrian interests.

The regime apparently believed the balance of power allowed Syria to avoid total submission to US demands for several reasons. First, Syrian analysts believed the US could not as readily resort to military force against Syria as it did against Iraq because Syria did not violate international legitimacy, was not subject to international sanctions, and, far from isolated, has diverse alliances at the regional and international levels. Syria had little oil wealth to fund a US occupation and no opposition prepared to collaborate with it. Washington's difficulties in Iraq, it was hoped, would bring it to the realisation that its military power did not nullify its need for co-operation from regional states--that had to be based on mutual respect and sovereignty.

Secondly, in their view, Syria had enough "cards" to make its co-operation important to Washington. Thus, the prevention of terrorism required a stable regional order and a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and this could not be achieved except through US co-operation with stable, nationally legitimate regimes such as Syria's. Syria's pacification of Lebanon, once a source of regional instability and terrorism, its unique ability to restrain Hizbollah with its proven ability to hurt Israel, its centrality to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement and its readiness for peace with Israel, its secular multi-communal model of governance, its successful elimination of violent Islamic fundamentalism at home and its intelligence co-operation against terrorism--all should make it a natural partner of a US administration that wanted regional stability.

There were, however, serious problems or dilemmas involved with this strategy. One was the fact that the neo-cons had little interest in regional stability or a peace settlement, hence saw no advantage in co-operating with Syria. Rather they succeeded in making it official US policy not to offer inducements to "rogue states" to change their behaviour. According to Flynt Leverett, a former high US official, this meant that the only US policy option was simply to increase pressure, threats and sanctions against Syria.³⁴

Given this, Syria's main protection from US attack and leverage over Washington derived from America's difficulties in pacifying Iraq. Yet while these drove US pragmatists, including US generals in Iraq, to favour co-operation with Syria, the neo-cons and hard-liners in the Pentagon obstructed it. This meant that Syria had a certain interest in facilitating the escalation of the insurgency which, however, if pursued, was bound to exacerbate relations with the US.

Even if Syria did not wholly abandon this option (a certain "stick"), it soon embarked on a policy of making incremental concessions to Washington (carrots). Bashar may have received the impression from US officials that co-operation would bring rewards and some of his

advisors wanted to offer significant concessions. What constrained the pursuit of this option was that when Syria made concessions, they were followed by increased pressure rather than improvements in relations. Syria's problem was that only concessions seemed able to blunt US hostility but concessions made under threat only strengthened US hard-liners and conveyed the impression that threats work and that the US need not provide any carrots. William J. Burns, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, put Washington's view that "Syria harbours the illusion that cosmetic steps will be enough to defuse our concerns. .. from a misplaced belief that U.S. engagement in Iraq and with the Israelis and Palestinians will prevent us from pursuing a robust agenda with Syria." Burns acknowledged that Syrian co-operation against al-Qaida had saved American lives but this was not sufficient to outweigh Damascus continued support for other "terror groups"--i.e. those contesting Israel's hold over occupied Palestinian territories.³⁵

Despite a general strategic consensus on how to deal with the US, the Syrian regime appeared at times to be split over tactics or interpretations of the situation and, hence to act incoherently. Bashar and his liberal advisors were keener to reach accommodation with the US, banking on the "rational" wing of the US administration. What obstructed US-Syrian co-operation, in Bashar's view, was the unbalanced ideological policy followed by the US that, through its unqualified support for Israel and its invasion of Iraq, actually inflamed terrorism, and hence was at odds with its own national security. He went on to distinguish between the irrational wing of the US administration, the neo-cons who recklessly endangered US national interests on behalf of Israel and the rational elements, embodied by Secretary of State Colin Powell who could recognise the US interest in dealing with Syria. "The only problem between us and the United States is the Israel issue," he insisted. ³⁶ Others within the Syrian regime, notably Foreign Minister al-Sharaa, were pessimistic that any arrangement could be reached with a regime so dominated by the neo-cons, without sacrificing Syria's interests and principles. The most overt case of intra-regime conflict was the vote over UN resolution 1483 from which the Syrian delegate absented himself, having received contradictory instructions to vote for it from the president and to vote against from the vice-president and foreign minister.

Unable to mollify Washington, Damascus also pursued a diplomacy of diversifying ties in order avoid the international isolation that had allowed the US to target Iraq. Syria and Turkey, sharing an interest in containing Kurdish "separatism" in Iraq, increasingly aligned. Bashar also pursued alignment with Europe as crucial to Syria's economic re-generation but also to provide a political shield against US hostility. While some European states sided with the US invasion of Iraq, they did not follow Washington in its hostility toward Syria; for example, even pro-US Spain condemned the 2003 Israel air strike on Syria, exchanged state visits with Damascus and made it clear that it did not view Syria in the same light as pre-war Iraq.³⁷ The capstone of Syria's European policy, adhesion to the Euro-Med agreement, has, however, been obstructed or delayed by European states acting on behalf of Washington's agenda. The European Commission and Syria initialed the agreement at the end of 2003, but certain European governments tried to make it conditional on Syria's adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention--a virtual unilateral disarmament that Damascus could not accept. A compromise agreement on the wording of the clause was apparently reached, but the agreement was then made conditional on Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. These developments signalled greater success on Washington's part in driving a wedge between Syria and Europe. Subsequently, Syria has worked to build denser economic and strategic ties with Russia, China and Asia. Russian and Chinese oil firms have increased their presence in Syria and there has been a significant shift in Syrian trade toward Asia and away from Europe.

The Syrian-US Duel in the War's Aftermath.

A look at the *evolution* of the US-Syrian conflict illuminates how Syria, under intense pressure and perhaps divided, has seemingly pursued contradictory or zigzagging policies,

and has, over the long-term, incrementally conceded many US demands, but that, despite this, US pressure has actually tended to *escalate*.

Military Threats

In the wake of the Iraq war, when the US seemed on the verge of targeting Syria, Damascus made several concessions, including closing the border with Iraq and the press offices of the Palestinian factions. Temporarily, Washington reduced its anti-Syrian rhetoric, with Bush stating that Syria had got the message that it needed to cooperate. By the summer of 2003, however, Washington was claiming that Syria had not complied with its demands and levels of tension were described as reaching a "Syrian-American crisis; in June, US forces clashed with and captured Syrian troops in a raid against supposed insurgents that penetrated well inside the Syrian border.³⁸ The October 2003 an Israeli air-raid on the Palestinian camp was widely seen as part of an American strategy to ratchet up the pressure on Syria.

Economic Sanctions

In November 2003, Bush approved the so-called Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA) which imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on Syria until it complies with all US demands. The act was sponsored by Zionist congressman Eliot Engel of New York and backed by a coalition of Zionist, Maronite Christian and the Christian Right pressure groups. Bush had initially resisted the bill before the Iraq war on the grounds that the US wanted Syrian co-operation in the war on terrorism but Syria's opposition to the war and, specifically, charges that figures in Bashar's inner circle had sent weapons to Saddam before the war were decisive in shifting Bush.³⁹ The act bans the US export of dual use items to Syria (and attempts to prohibit neighbouring countries from doing so as well) and may thus make it hard to get US high technology equipment for Syria's telecommunications and oil industries. It also gives Bush the option to apply several other sanctions, most of which, given the paucity of US-Syrian economic relations, would have little effect on Syria's economy but which would sever the already fragile remaining ties between Syria and the US, such as breaking diplomatic relations and airline ties. The exceptions that could harm the economy are the accompanying US designation of the Syrian commercial Bank as a money-laundering which has severed banking relations and the provision allowing Bush to require US oil companies to withdraw from Syria, which has not, however, been applied. However, the export ban functions as a de facto restriction on US investment in Syria and may be designed to ease American businesses out of Syria gradually.

Initially Syrian analysts tended to dismiss the act as an appeasement of domestic pressure groups and were unconvinced that Bush would force US oil companies to eschew profitable deals. Syria granted US companies concessions designed to increase their stake in Syria in the hope that they could counterbalance the neo-cons in the US policy process. Some believe that Syria's choice of an American consortium over a French one was a factor in Chirac's subsequent alignment with Washington against Syria's presence in Lebanon. Subsequently two US oil firms have withdrawn from Syria. At the same time, Syria had been assiduous in giving concessions to oil companies from other countries that would reduce its dependence on those from any one Western state.

The sanctions, which target Syria as a whole rather than the regime, are most damaging to the emerging private sector. All Syrians from the business community to democracy activists were antagonised by them; for example, well aware that money is laundered in neighbouring countries, none gave any credence to the US claims against that the cumbersome and bureaucratic commercial bank of Syria was money-laundering. Sanctions will only be effective if the US can get other countries to join it in isolating Syria, which it has so far failed to do; indeed, the European Commission stated that "The policy of imposing sanctions on Syria is not useful," Syria's neighbours, Turkey and the Arab League states, also criticised the sanctions. The act may, as Stephen Zunes put it, be "so filled with hyperbole and double-standards that it

undermines its own credibility,"⁴⁰ and the Syrian economy is largely invulnerable to its short-term impact, but the act institutionalizes the US-Syrian conflict and will likely prove very hard to reverse.⁴¹

Unrequited Concessions

Aware that much of the animosity to Syria was propelled by the neo-con's Likud connection, Bashar tried to disarm them at the end of 2003 by proposing to restart the peace negotiations with Israel at the point where the two had reached agreement under Rabin; he went further and even hinted that he was willing to negotiate without any preconditions whatsoever. Sharon, however, had no interest in this offer and the neo-cons believed peace and the Golan would be gifts to which Syria was unentitled. At the same time, Syria started making more concessions on Iraq (relations with the regime, border controls).

Syria professed to be receiving mixed signals from Washington that confused it as to what the US actually wanted, how far it was willing to go to impose its will, and whether a deal was possible. Thus, in April 2004, US officials acknowledged improvements in Syrian measures against infiltrators but in May 2004, Bush nevertheless applied sanctions under SALSA, accompanying it with an extraordinary piece of rhetoric overkill, in which he charged that Syrian policy constituted a "*unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States*" According to Aziz Shukri, professor of international law at Damascus University, "there is a feeling of anger, despair and outrage. We don't know whom to believe,"⁴² The only explanation for the incoherence of US policy, he believed, was that the State Department and the Pentagon had two contradictory policies toward Syria.

Syria made another wave of concessions over relations with the Iraqi regime and the Iraq borders in the summer of 2004. According to Samir al-Taqi, an independent Syrian analyst, Syria thought these concessions would show good intentions and lead to confidence building in US-Syrian relations."⁴³ Instead, however, Washington chose to strike at Syria's most vital interest of all --its sphere of influence in Lebanon.

Washington's Revenge: forcing Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon

Washington had long seen Lebanon as a point of vulnerability for Syria⁴⁴ If Syria could be forced out of Lebanon, a pro-Western Lebanese government could be brought to sign a peace treaty with Israel; the Syrian regime, isolated and having suffered major loss of prestige, might collapse. In 2004 a chain of events in Lebanon allowed Washington to strike a major blow at Syria which seemingly fell into a trap being prepared for it. Apparently intent on heading off any challenges to its control over Lebanon, Syria engineered a change in the Lebanese constitution allowing its main Lebanese ally, President Emile Lahoud to assume another term. Lahoud is heir to the Shihabist tradition among Maronites that see Lebanon as Arab and the presidency not an instrument of Maronite interests; this and his close alignment with Syria meant he had little popularity in the Maronite community but, as ex-head of the Lebanese army, he controlled the Lebanese security establishment. Lahoud's rivals, Hariiri and Druze leader, Walid Junblatt objected to a new term. Hariri apparently enlisted France's Chirac, a close friend who, perhaps seeking to heal the breach with Washington over Iraq, formed a tactical alliance with the US in the Security council to sneak through UN resolution 1559 in September 2004 calling on Syria (without actually naming it) to withdraw from the country and for Hizbollah to disarm, despite the protest of the Lebanese government against this interference in its sovereign affairs. This change in French policy, from a buffer against to a facilitator of, US threats against Syria was a major diplomatic setback for Damascus, and demonstrated a revived propensity for the core states, temporarily split over the US invasion of Iraq, to bandwagon with the hegemon.

Syria was taken wholly by surprise. It had misread US intentions over Lebanon (where Washington used to see Syria as a stabilising force.) , believing its rhetoric on withdrawal was meant to get Syrian concessions over Iraq--which Syria was delivering. It also had not expected

Chirac's alliance with the US on the issue. Alarmed, Syria now moved to further comply with other US demands as a way of heading off those in Lebanon. Top Hamas leaders, Khaled Mashal and Imad al-Alami, left Damascus. A senior US delegation visited Damascus to arrange Syrian-US co-ordination over the Iraq border and Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Syria's co-operation. That Israel chose this juncture to assassinate a Hamas official in Damascus was widely seen as either an Israeli effort to stop Syrian-US rapprochement or a double-game on the part of Washington in which it would pocket Syrian concessions, but keep up the pressure and give nothing in return.

It was, however, the assassination of Hariri that energised a convergence of forces against Syria's position in Lebanon. Did Syria engineer the killing? It seems inconceivable that any Syrian leader would not have anticipated the way the Hariri killing would be used, as it has been, against Syria; if one invokes the traditional legal principle *quo bono* (who benefits), the killing was tailor-made to serve the interest of the US neo-cons.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, many were willing to believe Syrian guilt, sparking an enormous backlash that greatly weakened Syria's position. A cross-sectarian alliance formed in Lebanon, bringing together the Sunnis (Hariri's constituency) with the Maronites and Druze against Syria and putting Lebanese Shia, Syria's closest allies, on the defensive. Saudi Arabia's, another of Hariri's patrons, but a long-time Syrian ally, demanded Syrian withdrawal, Europe and Washington were in accord on it, and no power defended Damascus from these pressures. Russia, once an ally, was unwilling to sacrifice any credit in the West for the sake of Syria and joined the bandwagon. UN officials threatened total isolation and punitive sanctions. Faced with this coalition of forces, and fearful that continued defiance of the UN in the face of an aroused world, would make Damascus the target of selective enforcement, Damascus apparently lost its nerve and withdrew its troops. Its alliance with Hizbollah and other Lebanese actors remains intact, and it can probably still veto any separate Lebanese peace with Israel that the US might attempt to promote, but Lebanon can no longer said to be in Syria's uncontested sphere of influence; indeed the struggle for Lebanon appears to be re-opened.

If Syria hoped that this major concession would appease Washington, it was badly mistaken; it only wet the appetite of the neo-cons for more and strengthened hard-liners who argue that threats work better than compromise in dealing with Syria.⁴⁶ The US now appears committed to a policy of what Flynt Leverett has called "regime change on the cheap."⁴⁷ In fact, Washington had thought the forced withdrawal from Lebanon might precipitate regime collapse.⁴⁸ Besides tightening economic sanctions, funding for opposition groups under a "Syria Liberation Act" on the Iraqi precedent was being broached in congress.

If so, this marks a watershed in US intentions. Previously, "prevailing wisdom, particularly within the State Department and intelligence communities, has been that Islamists would stand a good chance of stepping into a void left by the [removal of the Al-Asad regime]." In fact, the fear of an Islamist take-over has been the main factor deterring Washington from an energetic push against the regime; the US was also wary, after being burned in the Iraq case by exile-led advocacy groups, to put much confidence in the likes of Farid Ghadry's Washington based "Syria Reform Party" which in fact is of far less significance than were its Iraqi counterparts.⁴⁹ But as Murhaf Jouejati pointed out, the neo-cons success in shifting the blame for intelligence failures in Iraq from their own machinations to the CIA had ironically weakened the professional analysts most likely to oppose Syria's de-stabilisation.⁵⁰ The neo-cons were now arguing that regime change in Syria was the key to winning in Iraq and that Islamists would not necessarily be the beneficiaries.⁵¹ They were hoping that the Hariri assassination could be pinned on Syria and used to construct some international legitimisation for action against it.

Whether the neo-cons can isolate Syria as they did Saddam depends on the position of Europe. Although some European officials thought Syria should be rewarded for its evacuation of Lebanon, the US pressured the EU not to sign the association agreement with Syria, pending the outcome of investigations into the assassination of Hariri (and other anti-Syrian Lebanese

figures). EU officials expressed concern that Washington has gotten itself into an ideological straight-jacket on the Syrian question; but European governments seemed willing to defer to Washington.

In the Spring of 2005, the Syrian regime, sensing the futility of appeasement, reversed its policy of concessions. Intelligence and military co-operation with the US over terrorism and the Iraq border was ended while Syria played host to Palestinian leaders critical of the Palestinian Authority's accommodation with Sharon. Syria test-fired Scud missiles. According to Joshua Landis, Bashar was sending a message that pressure and hostility did *not* work.⁵²

Locked into a policy of threat and sanctions against Syria, does Washington have any other options if Syria remains obdurate? In mid-2005 military action against Syria did not seem to be in the cards. Obviously, if it is willing to pay the costs, the US can do militarily what it wants to Syria, as it did against Iraq, since there is no balance of power or normative constraints that can really constrain it. Since Syria is not isolated or demonized as was Saddam Hussein, the US would pay higher diplomatic costs, unless the Hariri affairs can be used against Bashar. Syria does have a certain non-conventional deterrent, but it is unlikely it could inflict much damage on US invasion forces. But, as Iraq has shown, the real military costs would come from pacifying a conquered Syria where the US would be much harder pressed than in Iraq to find collaborators and would have no comparable oil resources to fund its occupation. As Iraq shows, the Bush administration is keen to limit troop commitments and loath to incur troop casualties or bear economic costs; to critics, it wants "empire on the cheap," but it is already running up against "imperial overstretch." The military is over-committed and the US probably cannot take on another war and occupation without instituting the draft, raising taxes and generally imposing sacrifices on Americans for the sake of war with a state that offers no threat to the US. The manufacturing of threat did work with Iraq but, given the deception and miscalculation exposed in that case, elite and public opinion would be less easily persuaded of a Syrian threat and of a military solution to it.

The Impact of US Policy on Syria

Many believe Washington policy has aimed to humiliate Syria because it is the last remaining voice of Arab nationalism that has stood up to Israel and opposed the Iraq war. It seeks to teach the lesson that Arab nationalism is very costly and has to be given up. The final destruction of Arabism would help clear the way for a pro-Israeli Pax Americana in the region; conversely Washington's failures in Iraq and Syria's resistance to its demands raise the prestige of the Syrian regime and its ideology.⁵³ The US and Syria seem locked in a zero-sum game.

In this struggle, Washington has clearly succeeded in depriving Syria of some of the "cards" by which it exercised political leverage in regional politics and especially towards Israel, most notably its dominant role in Lebanon. Equally important the Bush administration's devaluation of the traditional goals of US Middle East policy, regional stability and the peace process, has correspondingly devalued the "cards" by which Syria could promise to deliver or obstruct these goals. Also Syria is increasingly isolated from other Arab regimes over their bandwagoning with Washington in the Iraq war and over the Lebanon/Hariri affairs. It might be that this has merely reinforced objective trends already entrain for the last decade which narrow Syria's Pan-Arab stature: the disappearance of the financial support Syria once got as a front line state in the struggle with Israel and the degrading of its military deterrent against Israel since the end of Soviet support. Washington seeks to drive a final nail into Syria's Pan-Arab coffin.

Given that the Syrian regime's main legitimacy has long rested on its claim to act for Syrian Arab nationalism and the apparent victories on its behalf by Hafiz al-Asad's foreign policy, the legitimacy of Bashar's regime might be expected to be suffering from its recent reverses. If Hafiz was respected for his strength, Bashar has been humiliated by his inability to respond to American or Israeli military provocations and his forced evacuation of Lebanon. To Arab nationalist-minded Syrians, Bashar seems to have squandered the "cards" his father left

him. For others, the mounting costs that the defense of Arabism is inflicting on Syria, combined with the me-first policies of the other Arab states and the recent anti-Syrian animosity displayed by many Lebanese, has stimulated a certain growth of a "little Syrian" identity at least partly divorced from Arabism. To the extent this is the long term outcome, Washington will have won.

Yet there are counter-forces and indicators: the very fact that Washington targets the regime for its stands on behalf of still popular *Arab* causes--its support of Palestine, its association with Hizbollah and its opposition to the invasion of Iraq--generates a certain solidarity between regime and people--and conversely concessions to the Americans cost some of this legitimacy. Many Syrians, feeling victimised by the US-orchestrated global demonization of Syria over its Lebanon presence, rallied around the government rather than turning against it. Secondly, the chaos and sectarian conflict in Iraq, together with the fear ignited by the Kurdish riots of 2003 and the rise of Islamic militancy that the "Iraqi disease" could spread to Syria leads the public to put a high premium on stability and generates support for the regime that ensures it: it is a "legitimacy because of a worse alternative."⁵⁴

Implications of the US-Syrian conflict for core-periphery relations

The Hegemon in the Middle East.

In traditional hegemonic stability theory, the hegemon operates multilaterally, in accordance with international legitimacy, while providing global public goods--above all stability. Hansen argues that the US unipole will husband its power, being less worried than under bipolarity about extending its sphere of influence against rivals. Even for Mearsheimer, an advocate of "offensive realism," the hegemon is, by definition, a satisfied power with a stake in the status quo, hence a stabiliser and "off-shore balancer."⁵⁵

The hegemon is not, in its treatment of Syria and its invasion of Iraq acting as realist theory expects. To a great extent, the benign phase of US hegemony was arguably a function of the bi-polar world when constraints on America's use of force in the Middle East forced it to operate as a stabilizing off-shore balancer. The release of those constraints under unipolarity has allowed a new revisionist force--the neo-cons and superhawks--to turn the US from off-shore balancer into a direct and partisan party to multiple conflicts in the Middle East. Believing US power to be overwhelming, they expected to use military force or "constructive" de-stabilization against states like Syria and Iraq that they deemed recalcitrant with little risk or cost. But the "blowback" from this policy--the spread of terrorism, soaring oil prices--suggested that the hegemon has gone from providing public goods to inflicting public costs on the rest of the world system--from benign to malign hegemony.

The costs of Bush's policies might be thought, insofar as the hegemon is a rational actor, to bring a return to realism, a prudent withdrawal from imperial overreach. This would transform its policy toward Syria from the demonization of Damascus to its pragmatic enlistment in the stabilization of Iraq; instead, however, the US refuses any accommodation of Syria's interests. This rigidity might be attributed to the propensity of the Bush administration to sacrifice "national interests" to ideology. To be sure, the administration has framed the situation in terms of ideology, of "good versus evil," but this ideology corresponds to and aims to legitimise the pursuit of interests: perhaps not US "national interests"--but certainly those of the ruling group.

What is obscured by realism's assumption of states as unitary rational actors and only visible if we desegregate the hegemon, is mounting evidence that the US policy now de-stabilises the Middle East because of its capture by highly particularistic interests wedded to Israeli expansionism and control of Iraqi oil. For the neo-cons, in particular, the more the region is in chaos, the more the Israeli alliance is seen as the only alternative for protecting US interests; the less stable moderate regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Syria are seen as compatible with US hegemony and the less likelihood, the US would seek to accommodate

their interests at the expense of Israel's expansion and settlement project – as the elder Bush seemed to do in the early nineties. An Iraqi client state is still seen as the key to resolving the contradiction between access to oil and support for Israeli expansionism. As long as Iraq is in disarray its government is in no position to demand a US withdrawal, opening the door to a recovery of Iraqi power and its possible use on behalf of Arab nationalism and at Israel's expense.

Explaining Syrian Defiance of the Hegemon.

How would small third world powers behave in such a unipolar order? Realists see the LDCs as having lost the leverage and autonomy they possessed in a bi-polar world. In the view of Escude, "peripheral realism" ⁵⁶dictates that most lesser powers, unwilling to pay the high costs of defying the core, are likely to submit, largely out of economic dependency. Classical realism would also expect weak powers, insofar as they are rational actors, to bandwagon with superior threatening power; for Hansen, they bandwagon for two reasons: since other powerful states do not balance against the unipole except on a temporary ad-hoc issue basis small powers lack the option to join a countervailing coalition against a threatening hegemon; 2) because they need to get the hegemon on their side in the regional rivalries that matter most to them (or must at least avoid provoking the hegemon into backing their rivals). Steven David's concept of "omnibalancing" rationality suggests third world elites, lacking legitimacy at home, align with a remoter external threat to contain a more immediate domestic opposition.⁵⁷

From a realist point of view, therefore, a rational Syrian regime should have bandwagoned to neutralize US hostility, especially since its stand against the invasion of Iraq had no chance of actually deterring the US and was potentially suicidal. Bandwagoning could have given Syria a share of the spoils or some side-payments, as Syria got in the first Iraq war of 1990s. Every other Arab state omnibalanced, defying their own publics to appease the hegemon, as David predicts; Syria alone did the opposite: it defied an external threat in part to sustain internal legitimacy. Neo-utilitarian approaches cannot wholly Realism cannot explain why a state would make one choice rather than another.

The constructivist view that *identity*--in this case Syria's Arab nationalist identity-- shapes states' conceptions of their *interests* adds a crucial ingredient but constructivism neglects the fact that material interests are not therefore nullified, they are simply interpreted in different ways. The key is that *state formation* shapes the way identity and material interests interact: in Syrian's case the exceptional historic frustration of its identity--arguably more than in other Arab states--issued in the mobilisation of Arab nationalist plebeian social forces by the Ba'th party which were then incorporated into the regime, putting Syria's foreign policy on an enduring Arab nationalist tangent. Identity was institutionalized.

Yet with the consolidation of the regime, the ruling elite acquired material interests to protect and regime survival became as much a primary determinant of behaviour as in other states. The Iraq war caught the Syrian regime between two threats--the sacrifice of domestic legitimacy if it acceded to American demands and US hostility if it did not. This was so, even if to a lesser degree of other Arab states but where, as in Syria, identity is strongly institutionalised in the regime itself, elites are more likely to opt for a reverse version of omnibalancing, defying an external threat to appease an internal one. As against the constructivist view, however, such a course is not possible unless material conditions are minimally congruent with the demands of identity; in this case Syria's relative economic self-sufficiency, or at least its lack of economic dependency on the US differentiated it from virtually every other Arab state, making possible its defiance of the hegemon. But once US military power was entrenched on Syria's Iraqi border, the increase in the threat to the regime changed the balance of systemic constraints to which Syria had to adjust. Syria's intricate balancing act, its mixture of defiance and concessions to Washington can be seen as a form of rationality which tries to reconcile its Arab identity with its modest power position and its survival interests.

Coping with the hegemon in a contested world order

But what counter-leverage, if any, does a small state have vis-a-vis the hegemon and how long can it sustain its defiance? Diplomacy can be seen as the marrying of soft and hard power, realpolitik and legitimacy, but the mix that small powers can effectively employ depends on the shape of the world order.

Hafiz al-Asad, operating in an era of Cold War realpolitik, faced a highly threatening world which could nevertheless be manipulated. Believing that law and diplomacy were toothless without military power, he developed the military capabilities to bargain from strength. Bipolarity, combined with the value the US put on Middle East stability gave Syria leverage: protected by the USSR it could act against US policy if its interest were ignored and deliver stability if its interests were accommodated. When Syria struck a deal with the US in the first Iraq war and thereafter US and Syrian interests converged over resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict; as Hansen predicted, Syria started bandwagoning with the unipole in order to get its support in the regional conflict that mattered most to it. Hafiz's ability to enlist American third party mediation framed within UN land-for-peace resolutions, while at the same time using Hizbollah to pressure the Israelis in southern Lebanon, allowed him to negotiate with Israel from a position of relative parity. There was congruence between Syria's power position and the international norms (UN resolutions affirming the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by force as Israel had done) it invoked to serve its interests.

Bashar al-Asad, on the other hand, faces a post-Cold war order in which the rules are contested and uncertain: while initially international legitimacy was to subordinate power politics, the second Iraq war convinced Syria that the world had regressed to a lawless jungle, as foreign minister Sharaa put it. In this malign world, the hegemon, places itself above the rules, while deploying illegitimate force and a biased interpretation and selective enforcement of international norms against smaller countries.

Convinced that Syria could not rely on law and the UN for self-defense, the Bashar regime reverted in a limited way to real-politik, trying to play the politics of bargaining with the Israeli-Washington combination: its use of its "cards" to negotiate rather than simply bow to US demands, to trade co-operation for concessions, even risking the second-hand use of force by proxies such as Hizbollah and prepared to tolerate some movement of jihadis into Iraq. However in trying to use Hafiz's methods in a unipolar world and from an decreased power position it risks the selective deployment of international norms against it. And it now confronts an ideologically driven hegemon that, confident in its military capabilities, is unwilling to bargain. What alone has sheltered Syria from Washington's wrath is the latter's "imperial overreach."

At the same time though, global norms, sovereignty and UN land-for-peace resolutions, still matter for Damascus as giving some protection from the US and, should the US again seek a Syrian-Israeli peace, some potential leverage over Israel' conversely, if Syria can be construed to be on the wrong side of international legitimacy, Washington can make Syria a victim of selective enforcement. These considerations were foremost in shaping Syria's decision to comply with UN demands it withdraw from Lebanon.

For Hansen, while small powers may choose to defy the hegemon over the long run, they will either adapt to the systemic power distribution, socialized by the costs of defiance, or they will not survive. In Syria's case acting on an identity so out of congruence with Syria's power position and a unipolar world order meant that, once the hegemon arrived on its doorstep, it incurred high costs and risks. As threat rises, identity is pushed down the agenda just as realism expects: Syria has ended up making a string of unilateral concessions while re-socialization may be downsizing its Arab nationalist ambitions, even narrowing its identity from the Arab to the "little" Syrian level.

IR theory, the world order and the third world.

What is the shape of the world order as it impacts on the third world? For realists it is anarchic and power dominated; for liberalism, international society and certain constructivist interpretations it is both decentralised (anarchic) yet international institutions, norms and law constrain power. Structuralism and "peripheral realism" accept that power dominates but sees the world order as more hierarchic than anarchic--where in the core powers lay down the law for periphery states. What does the encounter between the USA and Syria tell us?

As experienced from Damascus, the current world order is one in which the core states lay down the law of legitimate behaviour for others, while selectively observing it in their own cases or that of their allies. International norms are very selectively enforced and similar actions are legitimized or de-legitimized contingent of a state's power position or the favour or disfavour of the hegemon. Thus, Syria's relatively benign occupation of Lebanon, ending a murderous civil war and legitimized by virtue of it being on the right side of hegemonic power in the 1991 Iraq war, was now de-legitimized owing to its position on the wrong side of the hegemon in 2003. Meanwhile, the occupation in Iraq, though imposed by murderous violence, in defiance of the UN was ex-post facto legitimized and resistance to it de-legitimized under UN resolutions. Sheltered by the hegemon, Israel enjoys similar impunity in its colonisation and use of violence in the Palestinian occupied territories in violation of the Geneva convention and countless UN resolutions. Syria insists that under the UN charter resistance to foreign occupation is a legitimate right, but Israel and the US, with the consent of most of the core powers, have successfully cast such activity as illegitimate "terrorism" (obviously, there is some overlap in the two categories which provides room for contestation but in this the voice of a small power is inevitably lost). Similarly, in the brouhaha over the so-called WMD threat, Syria's chemical deterrent is targeted, Israel's nuclear one is exempted and Syria's proposals to make the Middle East a WMD-free zone, in which the two capabilities would be treated equally, is rebuffed by Washington.

Similarly while the end of the Cold war may have relatively empowered the UN, its role has paradoxically become more problematic from a "periphery" point of view. While once the UN was an arena that allowed the combined moral voice of small non-aligned nations to constrain the superpowers and a buffer protecting their sovereignty against great power intervention, the UN seems increasingly captured by the core great powers. When they are united it is deployed against weaker powers, as Syria found over Lebanon, while when they are split, as over the invasion of Iraq, the organisation is simply by-passed by the hegemon. The UN's failure to condemn the invasion of Iraq and its legitimation of the occupation even suggests slippage back to the era of the League of Nations when the international institution was paralysed by the unwillingness of great powers to act collectively against wars of aggression by their peers against weaker states and was used to hand out so-called mandates to rule over states supposedly not prepared for self-determination. Similarly, the norm of sovereignty that long shielded weaker states from great powers is becoming conditional and under siege.

While law and norms may be binding in the core, it is, thus, hard to see much evidence for it in core-periphery relations and indeed, the notion of a norm constrained world neglects how norms are used as instruments of power by the core over the periphery. There is a basic incongruence between the *ideological superstructure* of the world order--the norm that international law and the UN should eclipse power politics--and the unipolar distribution of *material power* --under which norms cannot constrain the hegemon.

Yet, while the oligarchic practice of world governance has introduced a element of hierarchy into the anarchy of the states system, this remains far from an order in which a central authority has a monopoly of legitimate force and issues legitimate commands. Rather it more nearly resembled a feudal order that combines elements of anarchy or hierarchy and where, in the absence of legitimate global authority, the strong "take the law into their own hands" and bend it to suit their interests. To be sure, in its dealings with Syria, the US is acting *as if* the world were a hierarchy of command in which it need not bargain and merely lays

down the law, but with only limited success. Despite its sole superpower status, it still enjoys no monopoly on force and the ability of its targets to wage asymmetric warfare means it faces the constraints of "imperial overreach." Even less does it enjoy a monopoly of "legitimate" use of force: sovereignty is still a sufficient protection that the hegemon has to isolate and demonize states before it is able to legitimise assaults on them. In this scenario, as the Syrian case shows sticks without carrots cannot insure compliance if the hegemon cannot readily legitimate the use of force or imperial overstretch prohibits it and if the target state is willing to pay the high costs of defiance.

Endnotes

¹Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria's Role in the Gulf War Coalition," in Andrew Bennett, Joseph Lepgold and Danny Unger, *Friends in Need: Burden Sharing in the Gulf War*, NY: St. Martins Press, 1997.

²Raymond Hinnebusch, "Does Syria want Peace? Syrian Policy in the Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, v 26, no. 1.

³Raymond Hinnebusch, "Globalizational and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership" *The Review of International Affairs*, 3:2, Winter, 2003, pp. 190-208.

⁴Sherle R. Schwenninger, "Revamping American Grand Strategy," *World Policy Journal*, 20:3, Fall 2003.

⁵Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, Washington, DC. Brookings Institution, 2005, pp. 7-9, 148.

⁶ Leverett pp. 47-8, note 108, p 243.

⁷ Leverett, p 134.

⁸ *Middle East International*, February 9, 2001, p 12; Yotam Feldner, "Escalation Games: Part II: Regional And International Factors Between Washington and Damascus: Iraq," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), May 25, 2001.

⁹James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies*, gives a summary of the original objectives of the neocon. A 1996 document, "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," drafted by a team of advisers to Benjamin Netanyahu by current Bush advisers Richard Perle and Douglas Feith called for "striking Syrian military targets in Lebanon, and should that prove insufficient, striking at select targets in Syria proper." ("Is Syria Next?," *The Nation*, November 3, 2003). A report 'in 2000 by Daniel Pipes and Ziad Abdelnour, who heads the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon strongly criticized Washington's policy of engaging Syria rather than confronting it and called for a pre-emptive war on Syria using Israeli proxy forces in Lebanon and Israeli forces to strike at Syrian targets if needed. A way to win American support for a pre-emptive war against Syria, they suggested, was by "drawing attention to its weapons of mass destruction program." These reports were signed by Bush's chief deputy on the Middle East on the National Security Council, Elliott Abrams; Undersecretary of Defence for Policy Douglas Feith; Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, Paula Dobriansky; and two special consultants associated with the neo-

conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) who have been working on Mideast policy in the Pentagon and State Department, respectively, Michael Rubin and David Wurmser. The signers also included Richard Perle, the powerful former chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Policy Board, his colleague at AEI, Michael Ledeen, Frank Gaffney, a former Perle aide in the Reagan administration who now heads the Centre for Defence Policy and David Steinmann, chairman of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA). Immediately before the Iraq invasion, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton traveled to Israel and promised Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that "it will be necessary to deal with threats from Syria, Iran, and North Korea afterwards." (Tom Barry, "On the Road to Damascus: the Neo-Cons Target Syria, *Counterpunch*, March 8, 2004; Jim Lobe, "Bush Stance on Syria Hit Shows Neocons Still Hold Sway," Interpress Service, October 8, 2003). David Frum and Richard Perle (January 7, 2004 *Wall St. Journal*) contended in reference to Syria that, "When the door [to democracy] is locked shut by a totalitarian deadbolt, American power may be the only way to open it up." and in their 2003 book *An End to Evil*, advocate regime change in Syria, Cuba, North Korea and Iran.

¹⁰ Jim Lobe, "Bush Stance on Syria; *Middle East International* (henceforth MEI), 21/11/03, p. 25; Seymour Hersh in the July 28 issue of the New Yorker Magazine, cited in Hussein Ibish, dailystar.com.lb, 26/09/03. One CIA analyst told Hersh, "the quality and quantity of information from Syria exceeded the agency's expectations." Yet, the analyst added, the Syrians "got little in return for it." What they got instead was an unrelenting Washington-sponsored campaign of vilification. (*The Nation*, November 3, 2003)

¹¹ Steven Stalinsky and Eli Carmeli, "The Syrian Government and Media on the War in Iraq," MEMRI, 21 April, 2003;" Oxford Business Group. Online Briefing, 31. 03.2003

¹² *al-Safir*, March 27, 2003.

¹³ Gary C. Gambill, "Assad's Desperate Diplomacy," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 6 No. 1, January 2004.

¹⁴ *MEI*, 2 May 03, p.13; UPI Apr 03; *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003; *International Herald Tribune*, July 16, 2003 p6.

¹⁵ *MEI*, 4/4/03 pp. 9, 25.

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, October 29, 2003; *Middle East Information Bulletin (MEIB)* Vol.5. No.6, June 2003; *MEI* 25 July 03, p 7.

¹⁷ *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003; Federal News Service, June 18, 2003.

¹⁸ Anders Strindberg, "America's nonsensical Syria policy," *MEI*, July 25, 2003.

¹⁹ Bashar Al-Assad, Interview with *Al-Arabiya* in MEMRI, June 22, 2003.

²⁰ *The Times*, Oct 21, 2003; *MEI*, 5 Dec 03, pp. 19-21.

²¹ *MEIB*, Nov., 2003 ;The Oxford Business Group, Online Briefing, 22.08.2003; *MEI*, 24 Oct 03, pp 8-9.

²² nytimes.com/2003/12/01

²³ *al-Hayat* July 7, 2004, *Daily Star*, July 26, 2004; Rime Allaf, "Point of no return? American relations with Syria," *The World Today*, November, 2004 .

²⁴ Leverett, p. 140.

²⁵ Daily Star, 9 March 2004.

²⁶ Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq's Evolving Insurgency*, SAIS: 6/23/2005, p. 47-8.

²⁷ Oxford Business Group, Report of 7 July 2005.

²⁸ SyriaComment.com, June 03, 2005.

²⁹ Yair Evron, *War and Intervention in Lebanon: the Syrian-Israeli Deterrence Dialogue*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.

³⁰ *International Herald Tribune*, July 19, 2003, p3.

³¹ *Al-Hayat*, September, 28, 2001. According to Syria analyst at the RIIA, Rime Allaf, since Hamas and Islamic Jihad's military leaderships are in the Palestinian territories, closing the groups Damascus offices would have no effect on them, and the US knows this.

³² Rime Allaf, "Wings of Change or Dust in the Wind?" *The World Today*, v 61, no. 6, June 2005.

³³ **Jim Lobe, "Bush Stance on Syria Hit Shows Neocons Still Hold Sway,"** *Inter Press Service*, **October 8, 2003;** *International Herald Tribune*, Oct 14, 2003 p13.

³⁴ Leverett, 143-4, 149-51.

³⁵ Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Washington, DC, October 30, 2003. Seymour Hersh reported in the July 28, 2003 *New Yorker* that the CIA had told him that Syria passed on hundreds of files of crucial data regarding al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups in the Middle East and that "the quality and quantity of information from Syria exceeded the agency's expectations" but that Syria "got little in return for it" except neo-con-inspired hostility. (Seymour Hersh "The Syrian Bet," *New Yorker Magazine*, 27 July 2003; "Is Syria Next?" *The Nation*, 3 Nov, 2003.; *New York Times*, 6 Feb 2004.

³⁶ *New York Times*, 1 December 2003.

³⁷ *The Guardian*, October 21, 2003; Arabicnews.com,10/10/03.

³⁸ Walid Choucair, "The Syrian-American Crisis," *al-Hayat*, 1 August, 2003.

³⁹ Prior to the Iraq war, President Bush discouraged the pro-Israeli congressmen behind the bill by observing that the U.S. had "both serious differences and areas of common interest with Syria. Managing our complex relationship with Syria requires a careful and calculated use of all the options we have to advance U.S. interests." secretary of State Powell told congress that the

bill would "have a negative effect on our efforts to bring down the violence, avoid the outbreak of regional war, and help the parties to a path to comprehensive peace." He added, "New sanctions on Syria would place at risk our ability to address a range of issues directly with the Syrian government and to change Syrian behaviour." (President George W. Bush, Letter To Congressman Robert I. Wexler Regarding Syria's Relations With Iraq And The Syria Accountability Act, September 3, 2002; Secretary Of State Colin L. Powell, Letter To Senator Joseph R. Biden Regarding The Syria Accountability Act, May 3, 2002).

⁴⁰Stephen Zunes, "The Syrian Accountability Act And The Triumph Of Hegemony." *FPIF Policy Report*, October 2003.

⁴¹ *MEIB*, Vol. 6 No 5 , May 2004.

⁴² *The Daily Star*, 26 April 2004.

⁴³*The Daily Star* (Beirut), 8 September, 2004.

⁴⁴Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p. 144.

⁴⁵Syria was irritated by Hariri's manoeuvrings, and the hearsay is that Bashar al-Asad threatened him; but Hariri had similar clashes with Damascus in the past that had been settled and the two shared an interest in Lebanese stability; Hariri had close connections in the Damascus establishment (notably with the Sunni "Old guard"); and, given the checks and balances in the Lebanese political system, it was never likely that he could mount a major challenge to Syria, even if he had so wished. Some believe the rivalry of the cross-broader alliances, splitting the elites of both countries, turned nasty.

⁴⁶ Joshua Landis reports on the triumphalism in the US embassy in Damascus in SyriaComment.com, Friday, 3 June 2005.

⁴⁷ *Financial Times*, 2 May 2005, 17 June 2005

⁴⁸ *Washington Post*, March 26, 2005.

⁴⁹ Stephen Bosco, "The Syrian Domino? ," *Harvard Political Review*, May 2004.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, Dec 27, 2004.

⁵¹In 2004 neo-con Michael Ladeen claimed in the *National Review* that Hizbollah was the sponsor of the insurgency in Iraq and behind it was Syria and Iran; the US needed to attack them in order to win in Iraq.

⁵² *New York Times*, May 24, 2005; SyriaComment.com, June 03, 2005.

⁵³ Ashraf Fahim *The Daily Star*, April 24, 2004.

⁵⁴*Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 16 - 22 June 2005; David Hurst in *Los Angeles Times* 7 June 2005.

⁵⁵ Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East*, Curzon, 2000, pp 49-81; John J, Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001, pp. 40-42, 380-84..

⁵⁶Carlos Escude, "An introduction to peripheral realism and its implications for the interstate system: Argentina and the Condor II missile project," in Stephanie Neuman, *International Relations Theory and the Third World*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, pp 55-75.

⁵⁷Steven David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*, v. 43, n. 2, 1991, pp. 233-56.