

# Through the Looking Glass: The Reflectionism Theory of International Relations

**by Terron Wharton**

Politics is a human endeavor, and like any human endeavor, it is impossible to predict or prescribe solutions with absolute accuracy. People will always surprise you. Consequently, political science postulates theories and models of human interaction at the State level that leaders and policymakers often use in decision making. While imperfect, these models have value in framing human interaction and establishing context.

Today, the two theories of Realism and Liberalism establish a broad foundation for international relations. In the early 1990s, Constructivism emerged as a new interpretation within the Liberalism tradition. It can be argued that every major international relations theory can trace its roots to Realism or Liberalism in some form or fashion and for good reason; the concepts of power and cooperation exist unchanged throughout human history. Both theories are repeatedly modeled in the real world and guide policy decisions. However, each theory falls short. Realism cannot account for true cooperation and non-rational calculus. Liberalism discounts violence and force as methods of guaranteeing security and long-term behavioral modification. Constructivism emphasizes the power of identities but fails in practical application. Each theory has a piece of the puzzle, but each fails to synthesize the whole.

I propose a theory of Reflectionism that reinforces the strengths and reconciles the differences of these three existing theories. Reflectionism theory postulates that a State's Image is derived from its response to an anarchic system. A State's Image is the combination of tangible and intangible factors, influenced by culture, that determine how it sees itself and desires to see the international system. It is, therefore, this Image that drives the State's interests and behavior. A State's survival is predicated on spreading its Image, and a State feels secure when it looks out and sees a world that mirrors its Image. The key question becomes defining a State's Image. If you can define the Image, you can reasonably predict behavior. I developed this theory while studying the U.S. government's foreign policy during the Iraq War. The Bush Doctrine, which served as the foreign policy philosophy

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of the George W. Bush administration, became the U.S. strategic approach for the Global War on Terrorism. It advocates Realist methods such as war, economic sanctions, and coercive diplomacy. However, the ultimate goal of the Bush Doctrine was not defeating terrorism but rather spreading American values throughout the globe, particularly in countries where terrorism thrived.

While Realism and Liberalism are not absolute “either-or” approaches, it is still odd to see such a jarring confluence of philosophies. A true Realist would say that Bush’s goals are foolish and pursuing them achieves nothing but draining the State coffers, leaving it weak with little tangible gain to show for it. The Liberal and Constructivist would admonish trying to spread our values through force and coercion instead of cooperation and understanding. Neither Realism, Liberalism, nor Constructivist, alone or in concert, offered adequate systemic explanations.

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As globalization brings competing Images

into contact more and more, understanding Images becomes more important in preventing and shaping conflicts and promoting cooperation. Image is a “total” concept. It encompasses geography, natural resources, and economic and military power, as well as religion, culture, history, ethnicity, and ideologies. As such, any attempt to spread or counter an Image must be undertaken as part of a whole-of-government approach. Without a holistic, unified approach, a State cannot hope to successfully propagate its Image.

### **Building Foundations**

Prior to synthesizing Reflectionism, it is critical to understand the two underpinning theories of Realism and Constructionism. In *Theory of International Politics* and *Structural Realism After the Cold War*, Kenneth Waltz discusses the nature of the international system, the role and use of power, and the State’s role.<sup>1</sup> Equally important, though unintended, his critique of democratic peace theory shows that a State will always believe its Image is the “right one.” Finally, In *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz discusses his three “Images” of international relations.<sup>2</sup> Waltz’s examination of Images as levels of analysis, as opposed to an integrated, cohesive construct establishes Reflectionism’s divergence point.<sup>3</sup> Alexander Wendt, in *Anarchy is What You Make of It*, illustrates the importance of identity in determining and interpreting actions. Identities are key to cooperation, and identities can change.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Samuel Huntington, in his work *The Clash of Civilizations*, illuminates the role of culture in conflict. He describes how States determine allies and adversaries, and he lists important “intangible” factors that determine a State’s behavior.<sup>5</sup> Despite their differences, each theorist offers a variation of the same concept: Identity is important, and it influences actions and can trigger conflict in some form or fashion.

While the theory of Liberalism is a

major pillar in international political theory, Reflectionism theory focuses on concepts more readily explained with Constructivism. Constructivism has a strong enough Liberal base to encapsulate the relevant theoretical underpinnings without having to examine Liberalism on its own.

To my knowledge, no one has attempted to reconcile Realism and Constructivism into an integrated, holistic approach. My goal is to provide a theory that fills in the gaps of each, thereby providing a new framework for policymakers.

## Image

A State's Image is the amalgamation of tangible and intangible factors, influenced by culture, that determines how a State sees itself and, therefore, desires to see the international system. Tangible factors are objective and quantifiable: military power, economic development and output, geography, and access to or lack of access to natural resources are all examples of tangible factors. Intangible factors include political and economic ideologies, political and economic systems, rules and laws, and shared ideas and concepts. These tangible and intangible factors are all influenced by culture, which comprises shared ethnicity, religion, traditions, myths, language, history, and key events. Culture continuously influences how tangible and intangible factors are interpreted, and this interpretation generates the Image. The Image then determines a State's interests and drives how a State will pursue those interests in the international system.

Understanding how factors contribute to an Image is critical to Reflectionism, and it revolves around one key tenet: not all factors are equal in defining an Image. Culture assigns weights to various factors, and some are clearly more important than others. This "weight" is important in determining interests and actions and in reconciling potential contradictions. If Factor A

and Factor B come into conflict, and Factor A has greater weight, the State will act according to what Factor A dictates.

For example, during the Cold War, the U.S. government undertook several programs and actions that violated several aspects of the American Image, to include self-determination, freedom of expression, and due process. However, the utter rejection and complete opposition to Communism was, arguably, the most critical factor of the American Image at the time. As a result, the government could reconcile actions that would violate other parts of the American Image, as long as those actions opposed Communism.

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Images are either inclusive and exclusive. There are many ways to fit into an inclusive Image or for that Image to reconcile with others. For example, State B sees itself as valuing free expression, freedom of ideas, freedom of religion, and liberal economics. Both the Muslim author who advocates pacifism, limited government, and strong social programs and the atheist who believes in strong centralized government and expansionist foreign policy fit into State B's Image. Each example matches a part of the Image. As long as a competing Image looks "more like me than not," an inclusive Image will accept or reconcile with the other.

Exclusive Images have narrowly defined factors that must be met in order for another Image to match or reconcile. State C sees itself as homogenously Caucasian; atheist, with zero tolerance for religion; and exclusively communist. Since State C sees its Image in

such narrowly defined terms, only another State with those factors will match States C's Image or reconciliation could only occur under very narrow circumstances. Ironically, depending on how State B weights its factors, State C could fit into its Image, but State B will never fit into State C's Image. However, one absolute applies to both Image types. Whether inclusive or exclusive, every Image has factors that are never acceptable. If one Image encounters another with those redline aspects conflict will almost certainly occur.

**As a State develops amid anarchy, it will respond to the system around it to ensure survival.**

History proves Images can change over time. European States existed as monarchies justified by Divine Right before they became democracies. Slavery is illegal in civilized society. Women, while not seen as equals everywhere, enjoy more opportunities now than during other periods in history. Images can and do change over time. As tangible and intangible factors fluctuate, the resulting interpretations will shift. Occasionally, a factor changes significantly resulting in a major reinterpretation that could shift the Image in profound ways. Conversely, while it is possible for Images to change, some portions (particularly cultural) are so fundamental as to be essentially immutable. Still, even those can change, though it takes a titanic, redefining event such as internal upheaval, external compulsion, or cataclysmic occurrence.

### **War Never Changes**

Reflectionism follows the Realist view of the international system. The international system, anarchic by nature, is not "interpreted" this way like Wendt asserts. It simply is this

way and will never change. Every State is responsible for its own survival. There is no higher power to ensure order or an inherent conflict-resolution mechanism. States must ensure their own survival. If not, they will be subjugated or marginalized at best or, at worst, destroyed outright. The State's ultimate goal is to ensure survival, and every action taken in the international system furthers that ultimate end.

As a State develops amid anarchy, it will respond to the system around it to ensure survival. These responses during the development process eventually coalesce into the State's Image. Multiple models exist to explain State development; however, Reflectionism does not view one as more relevant or correct than another. It does not matter how a State develops. What matters is how it responds to an anarchic system to guarantee its survival.

For example, State A is in a desert environment where water and arable land are rare. It formed when bands of warring tribes from ethnic group (EG) A allied to protect these limited resources from outside raiders. Before its formation, EG A fought a series of internal tribal wars that were extremely costly, leaving it weak. EG B and EG C saw an opportunity to gain resources and invaded, decimating EG A and seizing most of the water and land in its territory. EG A was racked by famine, disease, and starvation. At a low point, Hero A emerged, united EG A, and led them to retake the homeland by driving out the invaders and securing the borders. After the war, Hero A, at the peak of his influence, transformed the tribal alliance into a permanent government structure and was unanimously declared the first leader. EG A was now State A. Under Hero A's leadership, State A became extremely prosperous, defended itself from EG B and EG C (now State B and C) multiple times, expanded its territory, and settled into stability. Centuries later, Hero A is venerated as a cultural and political legend.

So how does Image form and how does it

then determine interests and actions? State A now has an Image that says water and arable land are highly valuable, raiders are a constant threat, and it must protect its people from outsiders. Additionally, State A views States B and C as its main adversaries and is not inclined to cooperate with them or trust them. Based on the Image, acquiring water and arable land become a prevailing interest, and State A is willing to use force to acquire more of both or defend what it has from outsiders.

To reiterate, a State's Image coalesces during its formation and development based on how it responds to the anarchic system to ensure its survival. The only way the system changes is through perfect homogeneity, which is an utter impossibility. There are too many competing Images and cultures for a homogenous global system. Regional homogeneity is debatable, though still unlikely. The likelihood of regional homogeneity is inversely proportional to the size of the region. It is certainly theoretically possible to achieve local homogeneity (a single tribe, small town, etc.), but globalization and the democratization of information make even this remote possibility less and less probable. As stated before, the differences are real, and some are so ingrained as to be rendered effectively immutable and irreconcilable.

## **Movers and Shakers**

States are and will remain the most important actors on the global stage because they are the only ones with sufficient power to impose Images on a global scale. Since no higher power exists to instill order, each State has absolute sovereignty. States will act unilaterally if necessary to preserve themselves by protecting and spreading their Images. Therefore, the State's Image determines how it will use force to shape the international system and accomplish those goals.

While States are Reflectionism's primary actors, there are other actors that affect the

international system. Ethnic nations, individuals, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) all fill critical roles. Each of these secondary-tier actors influences State behavior, Image formation, and Image spreading. Above all, they can instigate, exacerbate, or help resolve conflict. However, these actors do not play minor, supporting roles; they are forces pulling at a State from competing angles. Opportune States leverage these actors in pursuit of their own Images, while other States find themselves torn apart by the same.

Ethnic nations play a significant role in Reflectionism. Ethnicity is a critical part of culture, and culture interprets tangible and intangible factors to define the Image. In this way, the ethnic nation can have an outsized impact on determining or influencing a State's collective culture. In a State with a single ethnic nation, this influence could prove positive and produce an incredible level of internal solidarity, thereby generating a solid, unified Image. Conversely, multiple ethnic nations could prove disruptive and divisive, as multiple cultures attempt to assert dominance for the State's collective culture.

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In the best case, these disparate cultures reconcile and coalesce into a single, overarching State culture. At worst, multiple, competing ethnic nations in a single State can tear the State apart, devolving it into civil war and ultimate fracture. The ethnic nation puts forth a competing Image the State finds threatening to or irreconcilable with its own. By trying to establish a competing Image, the ethnic

nation triggers conflict.<sup>6</sup> While religions do not follow ethnic lines, religion exerts tremendous influence on the Image. Therefore, it is arguable that sectarian and religious conflicts follow the same lines.

Individuals perform two functions in Reflectionism. First, because of their ability to spread an Image or an Image component, super-empowered individuals are influential. Karl Marx, Confucius, and John Locke all spread political ideologies that have influenced State Images for centuries. The Koch Brothers have influenced (or attempted to influence) the U.S. Image and associated domestic politics and policy through millions in donations to particular candidates. Every super-empowered individual has the potential to affect a State, whether to reinforce a particular Image, counter it, or put forth an alternative.<sup>7</sup>

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Ordinary individuals also matter in a different capacity. Ordinary individuals who subscribe to a State's Image are important. The State will act to protect and preserve those groups. However, individuals can be leveraged by one State as an excuse to impose its Image on another. States have repeatedly used humanitarian crises and human rights abuses to force the offending State to change its practices or, in extreme cases, its entire Image. Others have used mistreatment of a similar ethnic group as pretense for force. Such was the case when Russia used the auspices of protecting the ethnic Russian population to justify annexing the Crimea in 2014.

Finally, IGOs and NGOs are influential institutions for three reasons. Foremost, they

can help spread a State's Image. I agree with Waltz: IGOs do not exist to promote cooperation and prosperity for altruism's sake. They exist to advance the agendas of the States that create them.

A common criticism of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is that its policies disproportionately benefit the Global North, whose States also hold the majority of the voting power within the IMF. The UN Security Council (UNSC), one of the most powerful bodies in the world, has, since its creation, acted as a dueling ground for competing foreign policy, particularly between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The UNSC draws its permanent membership from the World War II victors. Only the permanent members possess veto power, and just one veto can override the rest of the UNSC, even if all other members agree unanimously.

Second, IGOs and NGOs grant legitimacy to State actions by implicitly supporting the associated Image. Despite a professed belief in unilateralism, the U.S. still sought an international mandate for invading Iraq, via the UN, and Afghanistan, via the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While States are sovereign, they will subsume their sovereignties if it helps to spread their Images. IGOs and multilateralism enable Image proliferation while conserving a State's resources and distributing risk.

Lastly, IGOs and NGOs can influence States to adjust their Images or take actions to preserve them through force or threat of force. Al Qaeda's 9/11 attack caused the U.S. to launch a global war in attempt to preserve its own Image, while attacking the Image espoused by transnational terrorists and their State supporters. In 2013, after nearly 70 years of fighting with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo, the Columbian government agreed to land reform as part of the peace process. In both examples, NGOs forced a State to take action that protected or adjusted its Image.

## So Why Reflectionism?

Realism alone fails to account for the influence non-tangible factors, such as history, religion, and culture, have on State decision making and corresponding actions in the international system. While rational calculus is important in determining State actions, States often take “non-rational” action. Words, ideas, and culture matter, and these intangible factors are just as important in determining action as rational calculus.

Conversely, Constructivism highlights the critical role that Images play in behavior, but misses the correct conclusion. Constructivism has it backwards. Images do not drive the system. The system drives Images. Images are not useful to change the system; they are useful in predicting behavior within the system. The international system’s anarchic nature is immutable. Despite understanding, some States will always choose force to advance their interests.

Reflectionism reconciles Realism and Constructivism. By reconciling these theories Reflectionism accounts for the influence of non-tangible factors on State actions in an anarchic system, thereby providing a framework to analyze why States will expend large amounts of power for little tangible or purely ideological gains. Reflectionism completes the picture and generates a new framework to understand the past, interpret current actions, and provide policymakers another framework for decision making. Reflectionism provides a solid, but still untested, theoretical structure for scrutinizing global politics, but the question remains: “How does conflict start, develop, and conclude in a Reflectionist world?”

### Reflectionist Conflict Model

Reflectionism posits that States ensure survival by spreading their Image throughout the world with the goal of shaping the global order to

look like them. Conflict occurs when two Images come into contact and cannot reconcile their differences. This conflict is described through the Reflectionist Conflict Model (RCM).

The RCM has three stages: imposition, expansion, and contraction. While the stages may vary in length, every stage is present over the entire conflict. State A will use force to “impose” their Image on State B. Once the Image is imposed, State A will “expand” their Image within State B. Once the Image has taken sufficient hold in State B, State A will cease expending power in State B, “contract” to its own territory, and focus on rebuilding power for the next RCM cycle. Failure in the imposition or expansion stage will shift the State to contraction. Whether a State was successful or not, contraction always indicates the end of the cycle.

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It is important to clearly define what constitutes conflict. Simply, a conflict is any kind of disagreement, argument, or clash of competing desires, interests, or world views. Conflict does not equate to war, and force does not equate to violence. A trade dispute, diplomatic disagreement, or competing messages are all forms of conflict. War or violent conflict is the extreme. Additionally, power and force are not the same. Power represents capacity to achieve an effect. Force is power applied for purposes of compulsion. Joint training exercises between two militaries, leveraging superior economic conditions in a trade deal, and establishing diplomatic relations are all examples of applying national power. A bombing campaign, trade

embargoes, and expelling diplomats are all examples of force.

Imposition's goal is removing the old Image and instituting a new one. Expansion creates compliance with the imposed Image and sets the stage for long-term commitment. Contraction establishes long-term commitment to the new Image, maintaining and consolidating earlier gains, while minimizing potential losses. Imposition and expansion rely primarily on hard power and, in general, require large expenditures of hard power over a relatively short period. Contraction, by contrast, relies chiefly on soft power.

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States compete to spread their Image and use power to do so. While all Images are in competition they are not necessarily in conflict, and conflict does not automatically equate to violence. Inclusive Images compete to spread themselves but are more willing to settle for "good enough" as a way to avoid escalating conflict. Exclusive Images are less likely to settle outside of compulsion.

Stability is achieved as blocs (a grouping of States that share a common Image or whose Images have reconciled to each other) develop and achieve relative parity. States want the balance between blocs to be in their favor. This is where Reflectionism takes its name. A State feels secure when it looks at the international system, and it looks more like them than not. Ultimately, shared or reconciled Images bring security, not balances of power, institutions, or restructuring the system through mutual understanding. In short, Reflectionism looks for a "balance of blocs" instead of a balance of power or a balance

of threat.

There are two critical nuances with the RCM. The RCM does not mean a State will bounce from war to war while biding time to regenerate power in between. Indeed, if the target State immediately accepts the desired Image or the two Images can be reconciled, there is no need for conflict at all. The State simply moves directly to contraction and attempts to spread its Image again somewhere else or consolidates gains.

The second nuance deals with timing. The RCM is not a single, iterative process. State A does not go through the RCM vis-à-vis State B, recover, then initiate again with State C. Rather, the RCM occurs constantly, in various stages, across the international system. State A is in the imposition phase with State B via military invasion, inks a trade deal with State C to expand the Image there, and is finalizing a long term alliance with State D in a contraction phase. The model simply frames conflict between states (and other actors) as they occur constantly in a single cycle of a continuous, global process.

## **Methodology**

So if according to Reflectionist theory, States use force to spread their Images, does the RCM accurately describe how they do so? The RCM provides a framework to examine how States use force and power in the international system. To explore the model, I will use the prosecution of the Iraq War as a case study. I believe the model will accurately depict how States use force in the international system and show the linkage between a State's Image and its geopolitical actions.

Choosing the Iraq War is important for three reasons. First, the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was declared against a concept and worldview, not another State. While this occurred before when President Ronald Reagan declared a War on Drugs, there are three key differences. First, the War on Drugs did not result from a



deliberate, planned attack on the U.S. territory and its people. Second, while the U.S. conducted military action as part of the War on Drugs, it was relatively limited in scope and scale. Conversely, the GWOT resulted from a deliberate attack on the U.S. and spilled from the original target (Afghanistan) to a State not directly linked to the original attack (Iraq). Third, terrorism, unlike illegal drugs, incorporates a differing political, religious, and cultural worldview. Terrorism has many Image components, while narcotics trafficking, in and of itself, does not.

Second, the Iraq War can be interpreted as a “war of choice.” Despite not conducting the 9/11 attack themselves, the Taliban, as the Afghan government in power, gave sanctuary, aid, and endorsement to al Qaeda. Therefore, it can be reasoned that the Taliban, by proxy, provided the *casus belli* for U.S. invasion. With the Iraq War, no such act exists. While Iraq had violated several UNSC resolutions, historically that had not been an automatic pretense for military force. The *casus belli* rests entirely on factors the U.S. government determined to be contrary to its world view. As such, the Iraq War gives the opportunity to examine how a State decides to initiate the RCM.

Third, the U.S. government published three strategic documents, the National Security Strategies of 2002, 2006, and 2010 during the Iraq War that clearly outlined how the U.S. saw the world, how Iraq fit into it, and how it would use force in achieving its aims. These documents track connections between the U.S. Image and how the U.S. government attempted to spread its Image, if at all.

The case study’s sources draw from publically available government documents: Congressional reports, laws, UN speeches and resolutions, and declassified military documents. The chief sources are the National Security Strategies of 2002, 2006, and 2010, as these offer insight as to the U.S. government’s strategic approach vis-à-vis the international system.

Additionally, I have looked at several speeches from Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, paying special attention to the language within the documents and accompanying military action during the same periods. Some may argue that most Presidential speeches, laws, and National Security Strategy (NSS) documents are political rhetoric; however, rhetoric holds value in Reflectionism theory, as it comes either from the State’s Image, is intended to appeal to the State’s Image, or attempts to spread the State’s Image abroad. Words mean things, and the language, nuance, and manner of delivery all are useful in determining a State’s Image and tracing linkage to State actions.

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The study’s one chief limitation is its reliance on open-source government documents (testimony, memos, meeting minutes, strategic documents, laws and resolutions, etc.). However, all policy and strategy formation is influenced by information that is not publicly available due to security classification, legal restrictions, or government privilege. While open source information put forth by the U.S. government can generally be considered reliable and credible, occasionally restricted information will contradict publically disclosed facts. As such, I have to assume that the facts and rationale presented in these documents are the *de facto* truth that influenced the U.S. government’s policies and strategies and proceed as such.

### **The Forever War**

The Iraq War spanned two U.S. presidencies. While both administrations had very different approaches in advancing foreign policy, they

never deviated on the ultimate goal. Bush's foreign policy had strong neoconservative tendencies, while Obama's often leaned toward Liberal Interventionism. While seemingly divergent, both approaches are classic Reflectionism, in that each looks to promote the U.S. Image over others as the method for long-term stability. As such, the prosecution of the Iraq War is a discrete instance of the RCM.

The Iraq War can be divided into three distinct periods—invasion, surge, and withdrawal. The invasion covers the road to war from the initial invasion to post-invasion operations. The surge centers on the troop increase of 2007 and General David Petraeus's shift to a counterinsurgency strategy. The withdrawal period lasts from the end of the surge to the withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011.

Prior to delving into the RCM, it is critical to establish the U.S. Image leading up to 9/11 and 9/11's effect on that Image. In its simplest form, the enduring U.S. Image valued human dignity (life), self-determination (liberty), and free-market economics (pursuit of happiness). While this does not completely define the U.S. Image, these principles have remained at its core since inception.

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The events of 9/11 saw the U.S. attacked brutally and without warning. To make matters worse, the attackers, radical Islamic terrorists, wanted more than a change in U.S. policy; they sought the destruction of the U.S. as an entity. They wanted to extinguish the American Image and replace it with their own. The American

people and U.S. government saw themselves fighting an existential threat. As stated above, every Image has factors that are irreconcilable, and encountering a different Image with those factors will almost certainly produce conflict. Radicalism and terrorism were irreconcilable with the U.S. Image, triggering mutual, vehement abhorrence and thereby guaranteeing conflict.

Subsequent U.S. foreign policy centered around two broad goals: (1) defeating the terrorist Image, which birthed the GWOT, and (2) spreading the U.S. Image. The Bush Doctrine had four pillars: Non-distinction between terrorists and those who support them, unilateralism in pursuing terrorists, preemptive action against threats, and the Freedom Agenda.<sup>8</sup> The first three centered on defeating terrorism, and the Freedom Agenda centered on spreading the U.S. Image. Codified in the 2002 NSS, the Bush Doctrine became the guiding foreign policy philosophy post 9/11.

The 2002 NSS had three focal points regarding the terrorist Image. First, radicalism and terrorism were irreconcilable with the U.S. Image. Second, the U.S. government would seek to eliminate the terrorist Image anywhere, whether that meant attacking terrorists directly or clashing with States that sponsored terrorist organizations.<sup>9</sup> Finally, just destroying terrorists and their sponsors was not a long-term solution. The U.S. needed to spread its Image as well.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Invasion**

In September of 2002, Bush spoke at the UN General Assembly and laid out rationale for war based on five critical points:<sup>11</sup> (1) Iraq supported terrorist organizations, violating United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1373;<sup>12</sup> (2) Saddam Hussein perpetuated human rights violations, such as using chemical weapons against the Kurds; (3) Hussein sought to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and refused to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors; and (4) Hussein had abused the

“Oil for Food” program, using the funds to buy weapons. On October 16, 2002, Congress passed Public Law 107–243, authorizing military action against Iraq, laying out the same justification Bush gave the UN.<sup>13</sup>

On March 17, 2003, after four months of pursuing a diplomatic solution, Bush gave Hussein 48 hours to leave Iraq.<sup>14</sup> When Hussein failed to comply, the U.S. commenced military operations and coalition ground troops invaded Iraq. Coalition forces rapidly overwhelmed the Iraqi military, and on April 15, 2003, Bush declared Hussein’s regime was no more.<sup>15</sup>

After the invasion, the U.S. established the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by Paul Bremer. Two of his first acts were to ban all mid- and high-ranking Ba’ath party officials from places in the new Iraqi government and to disband the Iraqi Army. The CPA would mastermind the establishment of a Western-style Democracy by overseeing the fledgling Iraqi government’s drafting of a constitution, writing election law, and holding state, regional, and local elections.<sup>16</sup>

## The Surge

After overwhelming success in the initial invasion, the U.S. strategy faltered. While the U.S. was successful in imposing its Image, the Image was not taking root. Despite successful elections in 2005, the Iraqis, with heavy American sway and involvement, had yet to form a government able to establish the rule of law or provide basic services to the majority of its citizens. Several ministries, such as the Ministries of Health and Transportation were controlled by Sadrists, individuals with deep ties to Jaysh al-Mahdi, a Shiite insurgency group. These individuals used their positions to target Sunnis for kidnapping, intimidation, torture, and other human rights abuses.<sup>17</sup>

As Iraq teetered between chaos and order, one event tipped the balance for the worse. On February 22, 2006, al-Qaeda operatives bombed

the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, a mosque the Shiites considered one of their most holy sites.<sup>18</sup> In October 2006, Lieutenant Colonel Nycki Brooks analyzed the growing Shiite-Sunni conflict as part of an advance team for III Corps. Her report, dubbed “The Perfect Storm Memo,” compared the Samarra Mosque bombing to “the Shi’a equivalent of our 9/11...” and assessed it as “...the catalyst for the current escalating violence.”<sup>19</sup>

Disbanding the Iraqi Army and de-Ba’athification provided insurgents large recruitment pools. Ethnic tensions erupted in response to the mosque bombing and exploded into widespread sectarian conflict. The U.S. government’s foreign policy was in danger of failing, and it needed a strategy to prevent failure, reinforce gains, and set conditions for long-term success.

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NSS 2006 established that new strategy. Continuing the Bush Doctrine laid out in NSS 2002, NSS 2006 reinforced two key themes. First, it highlighted the terrorist Image as diametrically opposed to the U.S. Image. NSS 2006 explicitly states that: “From the beginning, the War on Terror has been both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas—a fight against the terrorists and against their murderous ideology,” and “in the long run, winning the war on terror means winning the battle of ideas...”<sup>20</sup> Additionally, NSS 2006 states how the U.S. government defines radical Islam’s Image and, subsequently, gives a point by point refutation based on the U.S. Image.<sup>21</sup> Second, NSS 2006 emphasizes that American security ultimately depends on spreading American values. Long-term security and success will come through the Freedom Agenda’s success.<sup>22</sup>

NSS 2006 showcased the plan to expand earlier gains in Iraq, focusing on building institutions, security forces, and economic capacity to support the new Iraqi Image.<sup>23</sup> The Iraq War was no longer just about Iraq: “And the success of democracy in Iraq will be a launching pad for freedom’s success throughout a region that for decades has been a source of instability and stagnation.”<sup>24</sup> If the U.S. succeeded, its Image may well spread to the Middle East as a whole, greatly bolstering security in a long-troubled region.

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In order to set conditions for long-term commitment, Bush ordered “the surge” which contained both a military and political component. First, he authorized an additional 20,000 troops to Iraq, with five brigades sent to Baghdad. The added troops would clear insurgents, secure the neighborhoods and population from further attacks, and help build Iraqi security force capacity. General David Petraeus, the overall military commander, would introduce counterinsurgency (COIN) as the new military operational approach. With the security situation under control, the Iraqi government had the space to focus on building political capacity and developing an effective government.

Petraeus used the surge to help fully implement his new COIN doctrine. The central tenet of COIN doctrine was ultimate victory came from the political process, not military means. Building strong civil institutions, establishing the rule of law, and protecting the population would shift popular support from the

insurgency to the government. Insurgents relied on popular support for legitimacy, resources, and protection. Once an insurgency lost popular support, it would wither on the vine.<sup>25</sup>

As a tank company executive officer in Baghdad, I saw a discernible shift in day-to-day operations. The emphasis changed from killing and capturing insurgents to “winning hearts and minds.” We were encouraged to spend money on projects and work closely with local leaders to resolve issues related to security and essential services. Most of all, we were focusing on perceptions. Information operations took on a new level of importance. We were supposed to be approachable and show ourselves as protectors and allies to the Iraqi people. Instead of focusing on establishing compliance to American authority, we focused on building commitment to the U.S. Image.

## **The Withdrawal**

At the peak of the surge in November 2007, Iraq contained 165,000 troops, and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) cost \$144 billion for fiscal year (FY) 2008.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, cumulative funding (FY 2003–FY 2008) for OIF to that point totaled approximately \$578 billion.<sup>27</sup> When Obama took office in January 2009, he inherited an economic disaster. The fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis was one of the worst since the Great Depression and wrecked the American economy. Rising unemployment, home foreclosures, and other serious situations forced a pivot to domestic issues. The U.S. government could not afford to continue to spend billions abroad with a crisis at home.

This “domestic pivot” is reflected in Obama’s 2010 NSS. Where NSS 2002 and NSS 2006 looked outwards first, NSS 2010 looked inward. In his introductory letter Obama advances that: “Our strategy starts by recognizing that our strength and influence abroad begins with the steps we take at home.”<sup>28</sup> He views American domestic strength as the bedrock for American power and influence, asserting “... what takes

place within our borders will determine our strength and influence beyond them.”<sup>29</sup> For Obama, American businesses, access to and quality of education, infrastructure, dependency on foreign oil, and the budget deficit are all just as critical to American power as military strength.

Rebuilding America domestically while advancing its interests abroad would require a different strategy. NSS 2010’s strategic approach comprises four avenues: (1) building the American foundation, (2) pursuing comprehensive engagement, (3) promoting a just and sustainable world order,<sup>30</sup> and (4) strengthening and integrating national capabilities. This new approach advocated soft power to pursue foreign policy objectives and viewed diplomacy as being “as fundamental to our national security as our Defense capability.”<sup>31</sup> International institutions were the lynchpin of global order,<sup>32</sup> and, as such, NSS 2010 advocates diplomacy, influence, and international institutions to maintain order and advance U.S. interests, while simultaneously allowing the U.S. to regenerate hard power.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the domestic pivot, NSS 2010 agreed with 2006 on maintaining a long-term commitment to Iraq as a means to spread democracy throughout the region. The U.S. government still sought “...an enduring relationship with Iraq based on mutual interests and mutual respect,” and hoped that the drawdown in Iraq would provide “an opportunity to advance lasting security and sustainable development for both Iraq and the broader Middle East.”<sup>34</sup> While the U.S. planned to withdraw troops, end the combat mission, and transition the military to an advisory role, it simultaneously planned to increase the State’s role to increase the Iraqi government’s political capacity and capability.

## Analysis

The road to war and invasion align with

the RCM imposition phase. The Iraqi and U.S. Images conflicted in substantial ways, and each point Bush laid out before the UN corresponded with redlines established in NSS 2002. Moreover, the U.S. viewed two points—support for terrorism and pursuing WMD—as existential threats. As a result, the U.S. expended hard power to impose its Image on Iraq, removing the old Iraqi Image and instating a new one. Iraq’s army was destroyed, its leader deposed, and former regime members banned from public office. Furthermore, the U.S. oversaw (and heavily influenced) the forming of a new Iraqi government, based largely on American, not Iraqi, values. What the U.S. could not change before the war, it imposed with near impunity post-invasion. Any trace of the earlier Iraqi Image was co-opted, modified, or removed if it would not reconcile with the American Image.

**What the U.S. could not change before the war, it imposed with near impunity post-invasion.**

Expansion’s goal is Image compliance, thereby setting conditions for long-term commitment. The surge marked the transition to expansion. Focusing on more than just security, COIN aimed to align the Iraqi people with the American Image (via the Iraq government), as opposed to the one offered by insurgent groups. The focus on “hearts and minds” aimed to change perception. Long-term success in Iraq would not come from killing insurgents. It would come from isolating and defeating the terrorist Image and replacing it with an Iraqi Image the American Image could reconcile with.

Contraction focuses on ensuring long-term commitment to the new Image established in the target State, while consolidating gains and rebuilding power for the future. During imposition and expansion, a State expends large

amounts of hard power to entrench its Image and set conditions for long-term commitment. States entering contraction are drained from the expenditures incurred during imposition and expansion. As such, a State will shift from resource-heavy hard power toward soft power options as it seeks to rebuild its strength while consolidating gains.

**...a State will shift from resource-heavy hard power toward soft power options as it seeks to rebuild its strength while consolidating gains.**

In November 2007 (FY 2008), at the peak of the surge, Iraq contained 165,000 troops and OIF cost \$144 billion. Additionally, cumulative funding (FY 2003—FY 2008) for OIF to that point totaled approximately \$578 billion. In FY 2009, OIF costs fell to \$93 billion with troop levels around 135,000. While the troop decrease was only 1 percent from the FY 2008, the 36 percent decrease in funding was a significant indicator that the U.S. had transitioned to contraction. From FY 2008 until the final withdrawal in FY 2012, funding declined each year by 31, 28, and 58 percent, respectively. Compared to the invasion through surge period, cumulative funding during the withdrawal was only \$225 billion, a decrease of 62 percent.

All the cost figures for OIF include Department of State (State) allocations. Minus a one-time \$20 billion reconstruction allocation, State funding for Iraq never exceeded \$4 billion and remained relatively static throughout the whole war. However, in FY 2012, where overall OIF funding dropped 58 percent, State funding increased 206 percent from \$2.1 billion to \$4.7 billion. While small compared to Department of Defense (DoD) funding levels and those changes, the increase is noteworthy as State is the primary agent of U.S. diplomacy, a critical

element of soft power. Obama's approach and NSS 2010 repeatedly emphasized the importance of diplomacy, influence, and international institutions to maintain order and advance U.S. interests. Decreasing hard power usage, increased soft power mechanisms, and shifting back to a domestic focus all indicate the U.S. had entered the RCM contraction phase in Iraq.

The U.S. prosecution of the Iraq War encapsulates a single iteration of the RCM. The U.S. imposed the American Image on Iraq during the invasion, expanded the Image and gained compliance during the surge, and sought commitment before contracting back to face domestic issues. While execution and effectiveness can be debated, the foreign policy matches the model.

### **One Team, One Fight**

I believe that Reflectionism provides a new, compelling construct for international politics with significant implications for foreign policymakers. Since State actions are determined by its Image, understanding the Image aids in predicting behavior. Policymakers can then focus limited time and resources on predicted actions instead of the white noise surrounding geopolitics. Also, this understanding allows policymakers to target the Image's critical aspects, thereby gaining relative advantage and preserving national power.

In addition to predicting behavior, Reflectionism emphasizes the need for a whole-of-government approach. Image is a total concept, and to successfully spread or combat an Image, a government must take a unified approach. Success cannot be achieved with unbalanced or unsynchronized applications of national power. All elements must work in concert to achieve success. An interagency approach is not just "useful" or "optimal" to State-level problem solving, it is an absolute requirement. Just like economic power and diplomatic influence, military power can only

spread one fact of the Image. Hard power may impose an Image, but soft power makes it last.

The U.S. government already has this framework—unified action; however, how successfully it is executed remains up for debate. Unsynchronized efforts, flawed execution, and misallocated resources have consistently produced interagency approaches often work mired in internal conflict instead of working in concert to achieve the State’s goals.

From the start, national strategy formation should possess an interagency approach in fact, not just in name. Mutually supporting lines of effort must incorporate all elements of national power. One agency’s actions should reinforce the work of others. Resources should shift appropriately from one line of effort and agency to the next, as the State makes progress toward its goal. There are no “lead agencies.” The lead comes from the decision-making apparatus, and proponenty does not equal leadership. The agencies simply execute their elements of national power, with none more important than others.

Finally, the RCM presents a potential revolution in targeting methodology. States should not enter armed conflict myopically focused on applying military power toward enemy troops, military hardware, and installations. Instead, any armed conflict needs a whole-of-government approach. The center of gravity is not the adversary’s military, economy, or government apparatus.

Armed conflict is simply the violent expression of Image competition. The center of gravity is **always** the adversary’s Image. Only by targeting the adversarial Image with all elements of national power can a State hope to destroy or displace an opposing Image and impose its own. Everything, whether military action, diplomatic pressures, economic sanctions, or information operations, is useless if it is not aimed at the opposing Image.

## Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall

Reflectionism has its own flaws and shortcomings. Defining an Image is, to a large degree, subjective. What makes someone an American? Americans do not share a single religion, have an official language, or share common ethnicity. An American’s family could have arrived in 1760 or 2010. An American could be a Socialist, Free Market Capitalist, or an Anarchist. Americans are Christian, Muslim, Buddhists, and include nearly every other religious group. Yet, there is something that is undoubtedly an American culture, society, and Image. We could argue all day on what defines an American and achieve nothing but a long list of beliefs and descriptors that will, at some point, contradict each other. Defining the Image is the theory’s central concern, yet the hardest to achieve.

**We could argue all day on what defines an American...Defining the Image is [Reflectionism’s] central concern, yet the hardest to achieve.**

A second criticism of Reflectionism is that it is merely a reinterpretation of Constructivism. Constructivism says the nature of international relations is a historical and social construct, rather than inherent in the system, and, as Wendt says, depends entirely on the notion that State identities are intrinsically determined, not extrinsically imparted. Reflectionism rejects this notion. Identities are defined by the system; the system is not defined by identities and associated interpretations of other’s actions. Wendt says, “Anarchy is what we make of it.” Reflectionism says, “We are what anarchy makes us.”<sup>35</sup>

Unlike Constructivism, Reflectionism says the system will never change. Wendt sees hope for us changing the system through mutual

understanding. While I agree that mutual understanding can promote cooperation and reduce conflict, it will never negate anarchy. Conflict is inherent in human nature, and while high levels of cooperation are possible, aggressive, predatory behavior will always exist, both at the individual and the State levels. Constructivism seeks understanding for peace, conflict reduction, and conflict resolution. Reflectionism seeks understanding for power and relative advantage. The Reflectionist does not seek understanding to deescalate conflict and foster cooperation with (potential) adversaries. He seeks understanding for domination.

## Through the Looking Glass

The purpose of this article was to answer two questions: Why do States use Realist methods for Liberal aims? Subsequently, if Reflectionism answers question one, then how does conflict initiate, develop, and terminate in a Reflectionist world? I believe that Reflectionism provides a new, compelling construct for international politics, and that the RCM describes with relative accuracy the cycle of conflict.

The world we live in is anarchic, and States will ensure their survival above all. This will never change. However, how States look to their survival is always in flux. While rational calculus is important in determining State actions, States often take “non-rational” action. Words, ideas, and culture matter, and these intangible factors are just as important in determining action as rational calculus. The two must reconcile to gain a complete understanding of why States do what they do. Reflectionism provides that reconciliation, thereby providing a new lens for interpreting international politics. **IAJ**

## NOTES

1 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA, 1979, pp. 103–105.

2 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001, p. 16.

3 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 103–105.

4 Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Spring 1992, pp. 394–395, <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-8183%28199221%2946%3A2%3C391%3AAIWSMO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>>, accessed on November 29, 2015.

5 Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer, 1993, pp. 22–23, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20045621>>, accessed on November 29, 2015.

6 The Yugoslav Wars, Turkey-PKK conflict, and the Nagorno-Karabakh War in Azerbaijan are all examples of ethnic nations influencing State behavior by triggering conflict through a competing Image.

7 An example of an alternative Image component is seen in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s efforts during the American Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s to establish equality for African Americans. Up until that point, the American Image saw African Americans as second class citizens and passed laws that projected that Image.



- 8 George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, The White House, Washington, 2002, pp. iii–iv.
- 9 Ibid., p. 5. “The United States of America is fighting a war against terrorists of global reach. The enemy is not a single political regime or person or religion or ideology. The enemy is terrorism.... The United States will make no concessions to terrorist demands and strike no deals with them. We make no distinction between terrorists and those who knowingly harbor or provide aid to them.”
- 10 Ibid., p. vi. “Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization.... Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom’s triumph over all these foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.”
- 11 UN General Assembly, 57th Session, Summary Report of the 2nd Plenary Meeting, September 12, 2002, <<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/586/90/PDF/N0258690.pdf?OpenElement>>, p. 8, accessed on May 31, 2016.
- 12 UN Security Council, Security Council Resolution 1373, 2001, “On Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts,” September 28, 2001, <<http://www.refworld.org/docid/3c4e94552a.html>>, accessed on May 31, 2016. UN Security Council Resolution 1373 was a comprehensive counterterrorism resolution passed unanimously in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. The Resolution has four key provisions: (1) it requires all States to criminalize funding terrorism and freeze any assets associated with terrorism, (2) it disallows support for and harboring of terrorists and their organizations, (3) it requires States to restrict the movement of terrorists between borders, and (4) it mandates full implementation of previous standing international conventions and protocols relating to combatting terrorism. It is significant in the fact that the Security Council imposed the resolution on all UN member states, making noncompliance not an option. As a result, any country found violating UNSCR 1373 may be open to sanctions.
- 13 Public Law 107-243: Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, H. J. Res. 144, 107th Cong., 2d sess, October 16, 2002: H116, <<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ243/pdf/PLAW-107publ243.pdf>>, accessed on June 1, 2016.
- 14 George W. Bush, “President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq Within 48 Hours,” speech, White House, Washington, March 17, 2003, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7.html>>, accessed on March 27, 2016. “All the decades of deceit and cruelty have now reached an end. Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict commenced at a time of our choosing.”
- 15 Raymond W. Copson, “Iraq War: Background and Issues Overview,” Congressional Research Service Report RL31715, Library of Congress, Washington, April 22, 2003, pp. 4–5.
- 16 Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2012, Kindle e-book, location 353.
- 17 Ibid., location 20032.
- 18 Ibid., location 3870.
- 19 Ibid., location 14294.
- 20 George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, The White House, pp. 6 and 9.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 10–11.

22 Ibid., p. 2. “America also has an unprecedented opportunity to lay the foundations for future peace. The ideals that have inspired our history—freedom, democracy, and human dignity—are increasingly inspiring individuals and nations throughout the world. And because free nations tend toward peace, the advance of liberty will make America more secure.”

23 Ibid., pp. 12–13.

24 Ibid., p. 13.

25 U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, Washington, April 2009, p. ix. “COIN is a complex subset of warfare that encompasses all military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency at the company, battalion, and brigade levels.... At its heart, a counterinsurgency is an armed struggle for the support of the population. This support can be achieved or lost through information engagement, strong representative government, access to goods and services, fear, or violence. This armed struggle also involves eliminating insurgents who threaten the safety and security of the population. However, military units alone cannot defeat an insurgency. Most of the work involves discovering and solving the population’s underlying issues, that is, the root causes of their dissatisfaction with the current arrangement of political power. Dealing with diverse issues such as land reform, unemployment, oppressive leadership, or ethical tensions places a premium on tactical leaders who can not only close with the enemy, but also negotiate agreements, operate with nonmilitary agencies and other nations, restore basic services, speak the native (a foreign) language, orchestrate political deals, and get “the word” on the street.”

26 Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” Congressional Research Service Report RL33110, Library of Congress, Washington, December 8, 2014, p. 10.

27 Ibid., p. 15.

28 Barack H. Obama, National Security Strategy, May 2010, The White House, Washington 2010, p. i.

29 Ibid., p. 2.

30 Ibid., pp. 9–11.

31 Ibid., p. 14.

32 Ibid., p. 40. “The United States will protect its people and advance our prosperity irrespective of the actions of any other nation, but we have an interest in a just and sustainable international order that can foster collective action to confront common challenges. This international order will support our efforts to advance security, prosperity, and universal values, but it is also an end that we seek in its own right. Because without such an international order, the forces of instability and disorder will undermine global security.”

33 Ibid., p. 3.

34 Ibid., p. 25.

35 Wendt.