Alexander Thompson. *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and U.S. Statecraft in Iraq.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. x + 261 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4718-1.

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Understanding Iraq?

The United Nations Security Council has elicited an extensive literature since the United States sidelined it over the Iraq war in 2003. With some authors boldly declaring the irrelevance of the council and others habitually emphasizing its centrality to governance in a globalized world, a third group has soberly and systematically analyzed its role and functions in a changing international order since the end of the cold war. Fortunately, this book falls into the final category.

Alexander Thompson is interested in the puzzle of why very powerful states at times work through international organizations when deploying force coercively, while acting unilaterally at other times. To that end, he examines U.S. policy in the Security Council with respect to a single case, Iraq from 1990 until 2003. Like other recent analyses of Iraq, he treats the two American-led invasions and the interim regime of sanctions and inspections as a single long war.[1] The book explores the reasons for the variation in U.S. approaches, ranging from the reliance on a broad, UN-authorized coalition in 1991, to a narrow U.S.-led coalition in 2003 without a Security Council mandate. The book does not offer any new empirical insights into Americaâs Iraq policy at the Security Council, but then this is not its main aim. Instead, it deploys a particular theoretical lens, institutionalism, through which it explores the reasons why powerful states use or eschew international organizations.

Working through the Security Council imposes costs and constraints on powerful states, but can also yield substantial benefits. It constrains them by reducing their flexibility in deciding when and how to use force and for what ends–regime change, for example, has remained an objective of statecraft that has found limited support among most members of the United Nations. It might subject the military activities of great powers to the scrutiny of an international body to which they need to report and that might hold them accountable–though the ability of the Security Council to monitor or even control a state using force is rather limited, as the experience of both the Korean War (1950â53) and the 1990-91 Iraq war suggest. However, obtaining authorization from the Security Council not only can reduce the political cost of using military force, but also can create opportunities to share both the risks and burdens of an intervention, as the example of the 1990-91 Gulf War highlights.[2] Authorization confirms that the Security Council is a useful instrument for powerful states pursuing their national security interests, but to maintain the utility of the institution, states also have to accept the constraints it imposes.

Many authors link the benefits from working through international organizations to their power of political legitimation.[3] From his institutionalist perspective, Thompson instead argues that international organizations are useful to powerful states intending to use force coercively because their approval of the use of force

transmits information to two audiences, and this helps to limit the cost (political and other) of coercion. Firstly, it communicates restraint and benign intentions to other governments; secondly, it signals to the publics of other states that the use of force is justified and that its consequences are desirable, reducing the domestic opposition to the use of force in these countries. Thompson lays out the argument and the evidence with eloquence and clarity, developing six related hypotheses that he tests through detailed process tracing of U.S. policy in the Security Council on Iraq during the three periods of the conflict. He highlights both what the George W. Bush administration perceived to be the costs of going through the United Nations in 2003 and the costs of the unilateral use of force.

While the case studies provide ample evidence for Security Council's information-transmission role, a question that remains largely unexplored is why exactly Security Council endorsement of coercive use of force does send these kinds of signals. Why would Security Council approval suggest desirable consequences of a military intervention? One possibility is that the Security Council has unique epistemic capacities to assess the outcome of any use of force, i.e., it has the authoritativeness of experts with regard to matters of peace and security.[4] While the Security Council over the last decade has tried to develop such capacities through the establishment of expert bodies, such as sanctions committees and the Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, and through its regular missions into conflict areas, it does not have the structure or the resources to make credible claims to unique expertise. Furthermore, practices like its fact-finding missions have often been deeply politicized, with member states divided over the scope and the terms of reference of such missions. Many of the nonpermanent members have neither the time nor the resources to build up expertise across the wide range of issues the council now discusses, leaving it dominated by the permanent five members (P5).

A second possibility, which seems closer to Thompson's understanding of the council, is that it offers a collective judgment on the consequences of the use of force. This is less an assessment of the likelihood of success or failure of any particular use of force or its consequences for the specific conflict or crisis that it addresses, but more a judgment on the degree to which the use of force challenges the existing international order. As the discussion of the Iraq cases in the book shows, those objecting to the use of force mostly do not do so out of concern over the consequences this might have for Iraqi

society or the utility of force. Instead, they object because of the perceived consequences for the regional or global balance of power or for important norms governing international society. Such judgments, however, are made with reference to particular conceptions of order, suggesting that the act of Security Council approval itself communicates that an action is broadly legitimate, as it complies with the norms of international society. The functions of international organizations in Thompson's model might thus be closer to what he calls the "weak" legitimacy argument of constructivist scholars, in which states strategically work through international organizations to increase support for norm-based reasons, than his overall argument might suggest (pp. 40-41).

Does Security Council endorsement necessarily suggest self-restraint and benign intentions? Had the opponents of the United States in the Security Council given up their resistance in light of substantial, and quite open, economic and political pressure, would this have allayed the fears of states concerned about U.S. intentions in Iraq and the wider Middle East? It seems likely that had the Security Council authorized the use of force in Iraq in 2003, it would certainly not have been perceived as politically independent, a perception that is central to its ability to transmit such information to other states. Thompson argues that its composition, "fifteen members, representing various geographical regions and levels of development," , and its voting rules (especially the veto) are central to the perception of the Security Council as politically independent (p. 37). However, the dominance of the P5 over actual Security Council decision making, for example, through such practices as the drafting of key resolutions in informal, closed meetings of the P5, arguably compromises this.[5] The limitations of the Security Council's ability to signal that the recourse to force is just and will have desirable consequences is highlighted by the levels of support for the use of force at the eve of the Iraq war. While public support for the use of force in Iraq authorized by the United Nations was higher in all countries polled than support for the use of force without UN authorization, only in very few cases did this lead to a majority of people supporting the war–most people continued to oppose it.

The former British diplomat Peter Marshall once suggested that a concluding article should be added to the UN Charter, stating that "Nothing in the present Charter should be allowed to foster the illusion that power is no longer of any consequence."[6] This book confirms Marshall's observation, and offers important insights into the complex relationship between powerful states and

the Security Council and the way in which it mediates the relationship between great powers and wider international society. It is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the multifaceted politics of the Security Council.

Notes

[1]. David Malone, *The International Struggle over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council 1980-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2]. Nico Krisch, âThe Security Council and the Great Powers,â in *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945*, ed. Vaughan Lowe, Adam Roberts, Jennifer Welsh, and Dominik Zaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 133-153.

[3]. For a classic statement of this position, see Inis Claude, âCollective Legitimization as a Political Function of the United Nations,â *International Organization* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1966): 367â379.

[4]. On the concepts of legitimacy, authority, and authoritativeness, see Allen Buchanan, âPolitical Legitimacy and Democracy,â *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 689-719.

[5]. The dominance of the P5 in Security Council decision making is well documented. See, for example, Jane Boulden, âDouble Standards, Distance, and Disengagement: Collective Legitimization in the Post-Cold War Security Council,â *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 3 (2006): 409-423; and Chinmaya Gharekhan, *The Horseshoe Table: An Inside View of the UN Security Council* (Delhi: Longman, 2006).

[6]. Peter Marshall, *Positive Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 68.

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