

Book Review: “Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and U.S. Statecraft  
in Iraq”

Alexander Thompson’s Information Transmission Theory

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Alexander Thompson analyzes why powerful states have an interest in working through international organizations when using coercive force. Specifically, he looks at the relationship between Iraq and the United States from 1990 to 2003. To support his argument, he uses evidence from the Gulf War, Operation Desert Fox, and the Second Iraq War. He makes the connection that powerful states usually do not need IOs to reach their goals as they have the means of achieving their ambitions unilaterally. However, it politically works in their favor to have UN Security Council approval before acting with force in order to secure foreign support.

Thompson argues two pathways of information transmission, which are signaling intentions to leaders and sending policy information to publics. According to him, the two pathways result in an increased amount of overall approval when using coercive force in the international community. It is easier for third-party states to support a powerful state with coercive intentions when they have received IO approval. To test his argument, Thompson uses six hypotheses that he relates to the United States’ decisions of whether or not to use force in Iraq. He also discusses the costs of constraints that occur from working through IOs.

Thompson states that, historically, even powerful states face consequences if they use unilateral coercion. Conversely, when using IOs powerful states may face costs of constraints. According to Thompson, these costs of constraints include delay, limited freedom, organizational costs, and scrutiny. An example Thompson gives is the Security Council’s role in the Gulf War.

The policy decisions made during the Gulf War confirm Thompson's first three hypotheses. These hypotheses state that international political costs of coercion are lower when working through an IO. This sends favorable signals to third-party leaders, thus leading to IO approval, which sends reassuring policy information to foreign publics. Throughout his research, he proves the rest of his hypotheses.

He derives a confirmation of his fourth hypothesis through a careful analysis of Operation Desert Fox. Hypothesis four states that when there is a low value placed on flexibility, states are more likely to work through IOs. Due to constraints, the U.S. was forced to operate unilaterally, although with UK support. This led the international community to gain a larger lack of trust in policy decisions made by the United States. During the Gulf War it became clear that using IOs was increasingly important, which is supported by Thompson's third hypothesis. Hypothesis three states that IO approval proves to the international community that there will be desirable consequences.

The Second Iraq War also proves Thompson's argument to be accurate in his analysis. As his argument states, powerful states have an interest in working through IOs when using coercive force, unless the costs of constraints are too high. Initially, the Bush administration sought UN approval, but found the costs of constraints too high. Thompson sheds light on a few important events that happened prior to the Second Iraq War that led the Bush administration to bypass the use of the UN. These events include the influence of 9/11, the Bush administration's ideology, and the lessons of Kosovo. The international costs of not having UN approval were disadvantageous for the United States. Hypotheses two and three are upheld in Thompson's argument as the international community reacted negatively to the United States' decisions in the

Second Iraq War. According to Thompson, the lessons that were learned between the years 1990 to 2003 prove the importance of an IO when using force.

Thompson uses a wide range of sources to support his argument. One of his sources is the Pew Research Center. He uses their statistics to show the relationship of foreign publics who agreed with military intervention under the circumstances of Security Council approval and of military interventions that lacked the approval. This is very helpful in understanding the importance of UN Security Council approval and the relevance of the UN. The evidence he uses throughout his argument achieves his ultimate goal of understanding why powerful states seek UN Security Council approval.

Thompson delivers a compelling argument with supporting evidence. His research can contribute to students' and graduates' understanding of why powerful states use IOs when using coercive force. His hypotheses are clear-cut and can be easily understood. He strongly implies that, although the Security Council has weaknesses, it is still highly relevant. This is clearly shown throughout his argument. If the UN Security Council was not relevant, powerful states would not seek its approval before using coercive force. In his last statement he suggests institutions such as the UN Security Council serve a distinct purpose because they do not favor the wishes of powerful states and will occasionally go against what powerful states want to achieve. All in all, Thompson's extensive research gives insight into why powerful states seek UN approval when using coercive force, and furthermore why they sometimes bypass the UN.

**References**

Thompson, Alexander. 2009. *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and U.S. Statecraft in Iraq*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.