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To cite this article: Jack Holland & Mike Aaronson (2014) Dominance through Coercion: Strategic Rhetorical Balancing and the Tactics of Justification in Afghanistan and Libya, Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 8:1, 1-20, DOI: [10.1080/17502977.2013.856126](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2013.856126)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2013.856126>



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Published online: 13 Mar 2014.



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Dominance through Coercion: Strategic Rhetorical Balancing and the Tactics of Justification in Afghanistan and Libya

Jack Holland and Mike Aaronson

This article analyses British and American justifications for military intervention in the decade following 9/11. Taking Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011 as the main case studies, the article explores the ways in which political elites attempt to achieve policy dominance through rhetorical coercion, whereby potential opponents are left unable to formulate a socially sustainable rebuttal. Specifically, in these case studies, the article explores the use of strategic rhetorical balancing, whereby secondary rationales for intervention are emphasized as part of a tactic of justification designed to secure doubters' acquiescence by narrowing the discursive space in which an alternative counter-narrative could be successfully and sustainably formulated.

Keywords intervention; rhetoric; language; Afghanistan; Libya

Introduction

In the changing geostrategic context of the early twenty-first century, as the world moved from War on Terror to Arab Spring, the language of intervention shifted in line with the politics of the moment, despite the fact that interventionist foreign policies remained worryingly static. Just as the 'War on Terror' was perceived to grant Blair and Bush right and reason to lecture states 'harbouring' terrorists, the Arab Spring was, once again, interpreted to afford political elites a platform to demarcate oppressed citizen from oppressive ruler. And, as before, this demarcation enabled western (coalition) military intervention in non-western states. What changed was the manner in which such policies were justified for British and American publics. This article explores these shifts in justification, finding them to be driven by a consistent logic: a desire to win a 'war of position' at home. We argue that instrumental considerations, conditioned by the context of recent events and public perceptions of them, inspire the linguistic choices of political elites. The empirical evidence for this argument is found in British and American justifications for intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011. Uniquely, this article undertakes a discourse analysis of elite language in order to explore the ways in which *secondary* justifications for

intervention have been emphasized in making the case for war. We argue that this emphasis can usefully be understood as an attempt to coerce potential domestic opponents into acquiescence, as elites strategically balance their rhetoric in order to win a war of position through the silencing of alternatives.¹

Structured in two sections, the article begins by conceptualizing the role of language in achieving policy dominance at home. Here, we outline the article's theoretical contribution to an emerging critical constructivist literature. We draw on Gramsci's notion of a 'war of position', as well as recent critical constructivist work on rhetorical coercion. Succinctly, our argument is that elites act instrumentally in attempting to achieve policy dominance at home. While invocations of the national interest remain paramount, political elites also pursue a crucial strategy of rhetorical balancing. This strategy is central to a tactic of justification that attempts to close down the space in which an alternative stance can sustainably be taken. In the second section, the article makes its empirical contribution, contrasting American and British justifications for intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011. In Afghanistan and Libya, American and British political elites have sought a 'balance of rhetoric' in justifications for intervention, in an attempt to dominate policy debates at home. The intriguing difference between these interventions is the context in which they were justified. We show that these contextual demands required coalition partners to emphasize different secondary justifications for intervention. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of strategic rhetorical balancing, as well as potential strategies for resistance.

The Language of Intervention: Strategic Rhetorical Balancing and the Tactics of Justification

Winning the War of Position through Strategic Rhetorical Balancing

The case studies of Afghanistan and Libya demonstrate the instrumental use of language by political elites who are keen to achieve support for intervention. First, while international support is usually desired, domestic support takes priority for a majority of western (interventionist) states, as a function of democracy (Holland 2012). Second, this support and the strategy employed to achieve it go beyond attempts to appeal and persuade. Resonance is, of course, important. However, British and American efforts to craft compelling justifications for intervention are indicative of a more sophisticated attempt to ensure official narratives win out. Building on an emerging critical constructivist literature on rhetorical coercion, the argument that we make here is that political elites frame foreign policy in a manner that seeks to ensure not only its resonance but also its dominance (see Holland 2013b; Krebs 2005; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007, 2009; Mattern 2001; McDonald and Merefieid 2010; Jackson 2011). Blair, Bush, Cameron and Obama have all attempted, to differing extents and with varying degrees of success, to dominate

debates on intervention. This dominance is achieved through the development of specific tactics of justification, which are employed to fight and win a ‘war of position’ (Cox 1983; Gramsci 1971; McDonald and Merefieid 2010). Our focus here then is unusual in three important senses. First, we focus on attempts to secure acquiescence rather than to appeal. Second, within these strategies of coercion, we focus on attempts to close down space through strategic rhetorical balancing, rather than attempts at interpellation through invocations of the national interest (e.g. Weldes 1996). And, third, we focus on the important role played by secondary justifications within this strategic rhetorical balancing.

Considerable literature exists in IR and FPA analysing the role of language in foreign policy (e.g. Campbell 1998; Jackson 2005; Larsen 1997). This literature often emphasizes the discursive construction of international relations (e.g. Doty 1993), or the instrumentality of politicians attempting to win support (e.g. Barnett 1999; Thrall 2009). However, while some excellent work has been done on rhetorical coercion (e.g. McDonald and Merefieid 2010), it currently remains an underexplored and yet crucial aspect of foreign policy and intervention. To date, Ron Krebs’s work represents one of the most sustained efforts to develop a constructivist analysis of foreign policy centred on the force of rhetorical coercion (e.g. Krebs 2005; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007, 2009; see also Mattern 2005). For Krebs, political elites attempt to coerce potential opponents rhetorically by removing access to those materials required to formulate a socially sustainable rebuttal. Elite tactics of justification then involve the closing down of the discursive space that an opponent might otherwise be able to occupy successfully and sustainably. It is about out-maneuvring and pre-empting those who would proffer alternative and resistance, if they were able and had they not lost a ‘war of position’ (Cox 1983; Gramsci 1971; McDonald and Merefieid 2010).

The fact that the word ‘elite’ appears frequently here is not inconsequential. While important exceptions exist, particularly in the era of 24-hour news coverage and public outrage at the violation of human rights norms (e.g. East Timor in 1999), interventionist foreign policy is most frequently pursued by those in positions of power within society, rather than those less engaged and less interested in world affairs. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci (1971) noted this important distinction between the political elite and population at large, as well as its principal differences in distinct political systems. For Gramsci, the relative ease of the Bolshevik Revolution—via a ‘war of movement’—was due to the de-coupled nature of state–society relations in Russia. In contrast, he suggested, the greater connectivity of state–society relations in western democracies ensures that opponents of political elites must first garner the support of (a more developed) civil society, if they are to successfully challenge those with institutional power. Such a strategy entails a ‘war of position’, whereby opponents must build up social capital by crafting competing narratives, into which the general population buy. These shape the ‘ability to imagine’ alternatives, as well as perceptions of their feasibility and desirability (Crehan 2002, 71).

While Gramsci's attention was turned toward social upheaval and revolution, his arguments are certainly of relevance to attempts to understand tactics of elite justification. Political elites attempt to maintain their primacy in a war of position by retaining the consent of the population which we argue, *in addition to resonance*, requires the acquiescence of those who might, given a more favourable discursive terrain, attempt to craft alternative policy platforms. In today's western democracies, the political capital accrued from election victories alone is usually insufficient to sustain a case for military intervention (Holland 2012). Political elites—those in and around government—know this, and usually embark upon a particular and often well-thought-out public relations strategy to garner support from those outside of the political elite. Gramsci (e.g. 1971) provides us with a theoretical framework to conceptualize this relationship. Gramsci's notion of hegemony—as domination through a combination of consent *and* coercion (e.g. Cox 1983)—usefully indicates the twin dynamics at the heart of relations between political elites and the general population on matters of interventionist foreign policy. Of course, here we are deliberately cross-contaminating both of Gramsci's terms (consent and coercion) in order to highlight the *rhetorical* coercion that is part and parcel of efforts to achieve 'consent'. Attempts to appeal and to secure acquiescence, we argue, are frequently mobilized alongside each other by political elites, in order to achieve policy dominance at home.

Alongside efforts to paint a conceivable image of the world when justifying intervention, political elites therefore attempt to construct foreign policy in terms that make it both communicable *and* coercive (Holland 2013b). In the first instance, political elites are often adept at constructing foreign policy in ways that render it communicable, by using language that appeals to particular groups within a domestic constituency. In part, this is why George W. Bush and Tony Blair often sounded so different, even when justifying the same interventions (Holland 2013a). In the second instance, political elites often simultaneously attempt to silence or bring to acquiescence those who might otherwise adopt an alternative stance. It is this second strategy—wherein political opponents are co-opted through a coercive linguistic tactic—that helps to explain the pattern of justification evident in the US and UK, as they intervened in Afghanistan and Libya. It is also this second strategy—of linguistic hegemony—that remains a relatively new and therefore under-explored topic of enquiry in IR and FPA. Here, we add an additional theoretical strand to our understanding of such strategy, before detailing a new empirical case study, evidencing its importance. To do this, we look beyond (important) invocations of the national identity, considering instead the 'shape' of justifications of intervention, and in particular instances of strategic rhetorical balancing through the emphasis of secondary justifications for intervention.

It is certainly true that one of the most common and powerful strategies that elites employ to co-opt opponents is the use of the language of national identity and foundational values (e.g. Campbell 1998; Mattern 2001). In the United States, it is perhaps members of the Democratic Party more than any other group

who have come to understand the force of rhetorical coercion, through the invocation of American values and identity. Krebs has traced one instance in what has become an enduring strategy of rhetorically draping Republican politicians in the Stars and Stripes (e.g. Krebs and Lobasz 2009). In 2002, the Congressional vote on the use of force in Iraq was scheduled to force Democrats to vote prior to their re-election campaigns. At this particular moment, Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party had been constructed, in the language of the Bush Administration, as a regime of pure evil, which threatened the fundamental 'freedom' that Americans cherished (Collins and Glover 2002; Jackson 2005; Silberstein 2002). To oppose the Bush Administration meant adopting a stance that could readily be equated with appeasement, cowardice and a lack of patriotism. Portrayed as failing to tackle evil and defend freedom, opponents risked the appearance of lacking in love for their country, or even as threatening the very values that are seen to underpin the greatness of the American nation.² Faced with the possibility of such a politically debilitating perception, it is unsurprising that many potential opponents opted to contest more minor, procedural issues—troop levels, timescales and the like—rather than oppose the decision to intervene in the first place.

While we agree (and have argued elsewhere) that invocations of the national identity are of vital importance in achieving support and acquiescence for interventionist foreign policies, political elites have undeniably attached considerable (and, at times, fundamental) significance to the pursuit of policy dominance through alternative tactics. Policy dominance, we argue, is often (and has recently been) achieved through the coercive effects of emphasizing secondary justifications for intervention, such that they narrow the discursive space from which 'critical' voices, inclined to alternative arguments, might proffer counter-narratives. Without such a strategy on the part of political elites oppositional counter-narratives would be able to engage the primary justifications of elites, undermining them from an entirely alternative angle. Political elites seize the rhetorical frames of potential opponents, folding them into their own case for war as secondary justifications. It is this 'balancing' of the case for war, through the expansion of the justificatory frames of elites and the seizing of rhetorical ground, that concerns us here and shapes our understanding of appeals to secondary justifications, which initially played a more minor or supporting discursive role.

The crafting of a strategically balanced narrative, which appears to account for all considerations simultaneously, serves to blunt the rhetorical charges of domestic political foes. In this situation, potential opponents are left to argue *about* and not *for* their particular rhetorical concern (e.g. the national interest); the debate becomes *about* what is (and what is in) the national interest, rather than an argument *for* a policy that prioritizes the pursuit of the national interest (over and above, for example, a policy premised on delivering humanitarian goals). The force of this relegation is to manoeuvre opponents into a position where they are more likely to opt (of their own volition) for silence, acquiescence or the negotiation of procedure—such as the terms and type of

intervention—rather than contest the general thrust of policy in the first place. In short, strategic rhetorical balancing, through the emphasis of secondary justifications for intervention, helps elites to win a war of position and achieve policy dominance at home, thus helping to enable military intervention.

Case Study Selection and Methodology

This article analyses two case studies: US/UK interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011. In the case of the former, this case study is limited to the three-month period in which principal combat operations were carried out, prior to the deployment of NATO's International Security Assistance Force. These case studies are chosen for three main reasons. First, the two interventions share a number of key features, which helps to render them appropriate as vehicles for the comparison of British and American justifications of intervention. Second, they enable a 'double comparison', in which British and American justifications for intervention can be compared: (i) with each other, at two moments in time, ten years apart; and (ii) through time, as they evolved over the course of a decade, when faced with new circumstances and contexts. Third, these cases are chosen due to the inappropriateness of alternatives: most significantly, the 2003 War in Iraq.

On the first, Operations Enduring Freedom and Odyssey Dawn (Operation Ellamy for the British) shared the objectives of supporting locals (the United Front/Northern Alliance and National Transitional Council and allies), maximizing strategic advantage through overwhelming aerial supremacy and minimizing the role and exposure of coalition troops in the intervention's initial stages. In Afghanistan, limited troop engagement was, of course, a temporary set-up; it was also, however, a central component of the conflict's early military strategy. In Libya, the war largely progressed in line with the lessons of Afghanistan and the broader War on Terror in mind: it was a conflict fought principally through out-of-favour rebel groups on the ground, backed by US/UK/NATO air power. And, of course, one of the most intriguing questions, in view of limited legal authority, remains the role of coalition special forces on the ground in Libya, who appear to have played a similar (if clandestine) role to equivalent forces in Afghanistan, helping to train and guide local fighters. While we could certainly have chosen highly divergent conflicts and still gathered legitimate data, this comparison helps to reduce concerns (as much as is feasibly possible) that justifications diverge *solely* due to the distinct nature of the impending intervention.

On the second, the selection of these particular case studies enables synchronic and diachronic comparisons: between states and over time. The selection of these case studies enables us to bring into direct comparison the strategic justifications of four important political elites: Prime Ministers Blair and Cameron, and Presidents Bush and Obama. This double comparison heightens the validity of our empirical analysis by enabling us to consider the strategic use

of language by two states, in two states. Usefully, they also enable us to consider politicians from both sides of the British and American political divides.

On the third, these are the only two interventions, meeting the necessary criteria, which are broadly comparable. Only the War in Iraq stands out as a potential omission, given the US/UK-led military intervention of 2003. However, first, the justifications for this war are situated in a lengthy prehistory of wrangling over weapons inspections and UN resolutions, which bias the justifications that were used. Second, the scale of this conflict and its nature are markedly different from Afghanistan and Libya, with ground forces invading from the south from the intervention's outset. Third, Bush and Blair (in particular) struggled to convince and coerce their respective domestic populations. Although, on the eve of war, Blair did ultimately achieve a majority of support amongst the British populace, this remained an incredibly divisive war. Afghanistan and Libya, on the other hand, achieved broad support and acquiescence, enabling us to compare two successful instances of rhetorical coercion. For our purposes, Iraq is important because of its impact on the context in which intervention in Libya was justified.

In each case, we focus on the words of Blair, Bush, Cameron and Obama, as the principal actors involved in the articulation of foreign policy. Their institutional positions mean that their words carry the most weight, and they stand out as the primary mouthpiece of government in voicing the nation's foreign policy. By 2001, Blair was particularly dominant in the crafting and articulation of British foreign policy. He had also recently won re-election. Bush too was enjoying what would be his highest ever approval ratings in the days and weeks before intervention in Afghanistan. In 2011, Cameron and Obama were both still finding their feet in terms of foreign policy; we therefore afford additional attention to the words of the Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State respectively. In each case, we collected and analysed the foreign policy-focused speeches, statements and press releases of these political elites. We performed a discourse analysis of these speeches, in order to classify justifications into two principal categories—those emphasizing the national interest and those emphasizing humanitarian concerns—and a range of subcategories (e.g. Fairclough 2000, 2003). In significant part, this analysis made use of computer-aided coding and retrieval. NVivo software facilitated hierarchical coding of national interest and humanitarian premised arguments, through a variety of related discursive nodal points (e.g. '9/11', 'regime change' and 'human rights'). Below we select quotations that usefully encapsulate broader patterns of justification.

Harbouring Terrorists and Humanitarian Assistance: Justifying Intervention in Afghanistan

The events of 11 September 2001 conditioned the subsequent American-led intervention in Afghanistan in two important ways. First, intervention was

justified principally through the language of national security and the avoidance of a second 9/11; the human rights abuses of the Taliban regime were a secondary and merely additional concern. Nonetheless these concerns served the useful political function of helping to quell dissent. Second, the location of the events of 11 September 2001 ensured that intervention was primarily justified with recourse to the reestablishment of *American* national security. Thus, for junior coalition partners such as the United Kingdom, strategic rhetorical balancing was required to convince the domestic population of the necessity of intervention. In this task, Blair went out of his way to emphasize: (i) the threat to Britain *and* (ii) the threat to ordinary Afghans.

American Justifications for Intervention in Afghanistan

American justifications for intervention in Afghanistan framed Operation Enduring Freedom first and foremost as a 'War on Terror', in pursuit of national security, over and above humanitarian concerns (Bush 2001a). While President Bush was initially cautious in his choice of language and phrasing, the notion that the United States was at war quickly took hold within the administration (Woodward 2003). It did not take long for 9/11, initially described by the President as a 'national tragedy', to be deemed 'a series of despicable acts of war' (Bush 2001b, 2001c). Framing 9/11 as 'an act of war' served to naturalize and rally support for military intervention but, importantly, it also served to heighten the tensions with later humanitarian justifications.

On the eve of Operation Enduring Freedom, Bush asserted that 'America respects the Afghan people, their long tradition and their proud independence. And we will help them in this time of confusion and crisis in their country' (Bush 2001d). There was, of course, a considerable irony in talk of Afghan independence at a time of confusion and crisis, which required US assistance to resolve, when that confusion, crisis and loss of Afghan independence was once again arriving, in considerable part, from the act of intervention. Such tensions in American desires to justify intervention with recourse to additional humanitarian concerns were commonplace throughout the conflict. The apparent paradox of marrying humanitarian justifications with the principal language of American security was frequently apparent. On the first evening of Operation Enduring Freedom, for instance, Bush insisted that American forces would simultaneously drop bombs *and* food:

At the same time, the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets, we'll also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan. (Bush 2001e)

This two-track approach of national interest-based counter-terrorism alongside so-called humanitarian relief efforts continued throughout the early weeks of conflict. 'While we are holding the Taliban government accountable,

we're also feeding Afghan people' (Bush 2001f). The unifying concept put forward in an attempt to overcome these obvious (and potentially debilitating) tensions was the apparent nature of the regime. Linked through the metaphor of 'harbouring', Bush conflated Al Qaeda and their Taliban hosts to argue that the spectacular terrorism the world had recently witnessed on 11 September was the external manifestation of a long history of cruelty within Afghanistan.

We have also seen the true nature of these terrorists in the nature of the regime they support in Afghanistan – and it's terrifying. Women are imprisoned in their homes, and are denied access to basic health care and education. Food sent to help starving people is stolen by their leaders. The religious monuments of other faiths are destroyed. Children are forbidden to fly kites, or sing songs, or build snowmen. A girl of seven is beaten for wearing white shoes. Our enemies have brought only misery and terror to the people of Afghanistan – and now they are trying to export that terror throughout the world. (Bush 2001g)

Within this framing of the Afghan threat, ultimately the world (or at least 'freedom-loving countries everywhere') and innocent, oppressed Afghan citizens wanted the same thing: to say 'good riddance' to the regime.

Throughout this battle, we adhere to our values. Unlike our enemy, we respect life. We do not target innocent civilians. We care for the innocent people of Afghanistan, so we continue to provide humanitarian aid, even while their government tries to steal the food we send. When the terrorists and their supporters are gone, the people of Afghanistan will say with the rest of the world: good riddance. (Bush 2001h)

Within the logic of American justifications of intervention then, both the counter-terrorism and humanitarian missions possessed a mutual aim. While proclaimed desires to end oppression were certainly secondary within American justifications for intervention, voices questioning this welcome additional benefit were rendered scarce. It is important to clarify that we understand secondary justifications not in opposition or addition to 'real' reasons (although others might wish to make that claim) but as distinct from and often receiving less (initial) attention than primary justifications. Frequently, secondary justifications chronologically follow primary justifications, in their articulation, level of prominence, and the degree of emphasis they are afforded. Through their (later) incorporation into the interventionist frames of elites, however, these secondary justifications take on an importance in enabling policy through the rhetorical coercion of potential opponents that belies their denotation as 'secondary'. While a minority of oppositional voices did recall Afghanistan's long history of repelling invaders, the notion that oppression justified action prevailed, even if pursuit of the national interest was the principal justification for intervention (e.g. Shepherd 2006). This is evidenced in the records of the Witness and Response Collection of the Library of Congress. Interviews

with ‘ordinary Americans’ reveal (humanitarian) concerns that were initially apparent—fears about the moral equivalency of killing innocent Afghans, for example—were slowly downplayed, in line with the Bush Administration’s increased emphasis on the humanitarian rationale for war (Holland 2009). While this strategic rhetorical balancing was unlikely to be fundamental to the prosecution of intervention (due to the upwelling of public support for intervention in pursuit of the national interest), it was certainly useful in curtailing the concerns of potential (ethical) objectors.

British Justifications for Intervention in Afghanistan

In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Tony Blair was particularly adept at reminding sceptics that their calls not to intervene would constitute *de facto* support for an oppressive regime. Following the ‘major combat operations’ of Operation Enduring Freedom, Blair reminded doubters:

... for goodness sake, let’s rejoice in what has been achieved, and let’s realise too that the victory against the Taliban in Afghanistan wasn’t just a military victory, it was a political victory. People in Afghanistan have been liberated from one of the most vile and oppressive regimes in the world. (Blair 2002)³

There was undoubtedly a greater balance between realism and moralism in British justifications for intervention than American counterparts. Blair’s use of humanitarian arguments reflected the political logic of responding to the events of 9/11. Notwithstanding Article 5 of the Washington Treaty,⁴ it was not a straightforward claim that Britain had a role to play in a coalition intervention that constituted a response to events in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania. With this in mind, Blair took far greater efforts to achieve two important rhetorical manoeuvres. First, Blair emphasized that the British national interest was engaged in fighting and winning a war against terrorists and their state sponsors in Afghanistan.

I also want to say very directly to the British people why this matters so much directly to Britain. First let us not forget that the attacks of the September 11th represented the worst terrorist outrage against British citizens in our history. The murder of British citizens, whether it happens overseas or not, is an attack upon Britain. But even if no British citizen had died it would be right to act.

... the al-Qaeda network threatens Europe, including Britain ... we have a direct interest in acting in our own self defence to protect British lives. (Blair 2001a)

Second, rather than a mere ‘additional’ justification, Blair insisted that arguments on the ‘humanitarian side’ of intervention were just ‘as important’ as those ‘on the military side’. This emphasis was such that the coalition’s *raison d’être* became humanitarian provision: ‘We have established an effective coalition to deal with the humanitarian crisis in the region ... Our priority has been to re-establish food supply routes into Afghanistan’ (Blair 2001b). Like

Bush, Blair spoke frequently and at length about the human rights abuses of the regime, but he went further in his insistence that the ‘humanitarian coalition’ would deliver on the ‘humanitarian front’ in the face of a ‘humanitarian crisis’ (2001a, 2001b, 2001c). The emphasis on helping ordinary Afghans was noteworthy although perhaps to be expected from a leader who had steered New Labour’s ‘ethical foreign policy’ towards his own ‘doctrine of international community’—a variant that, whilst saturated with the language of morality and human rights, was most obviously defined by its focus on intervention (see Blair 1999; Holland 2012; Lawler 2000). Emphasizing the engagement of the *British* national interest *and* humanitarian rationale reflected Blair’s broader political project and the demands of the domestic political context. Rhetorical balancing had already served Blair well in framing domestic policy (Holland 2012); in the realm of foreign policy, accentuated appeals to secondary rationale helped to silence doubters and co-opt potential opponents. For instance, ‘the leader of the Opposition, Iain Duncan Smith, supported the Government’s position’, repeatedly prefixing approval with ‘as the Prime Minister has said’ (HCRP 2001; HC Deb 2001a, 2001b). Emphasizing the national interest was important in achieving the support of an opposition party not long separated from the overt realpolitik of Malcolm Rifkind, while bold rhetorical contrasts made opposing Blair’s apparent quest to defend human rights appear cold-hearted and cowardly. In Afghanistan, as he admitted when recalling justifications for intervention in Kosovo, Blair sought a strategic rhetorical balancing to ensure victory in the war of position at home (Blair, cited in Coughlin 2006, 104).

R2P and Regime Change: Justifying Intervention in Libya

The context of a lamented War on Terror, juxtaposed with the optimism of the Arab Spring, conditioned intervention in Libya in two important ways. First, in contrast to Afghanistan, intervention was justified primarily on humanitarian grounds; national interests were a secondary justification that nonetheless served an important political function. Emphasizing the national interest was an attempt to outflank potential critics. Second, and relatedly, the domestic and international context made articulating a clear and consistent position on regime change particularly challenging. Secondary desires to avoid the complete alienation of Russia and China combined with the principal concern of political elites: to ensure potential domestic opponents were denied material for the formulation of a successful counter-argument. This concern was especially acute given the fertile landscape provided by public distrust following the Iraq War. Alongside a reduced commitment to nation-building, the implication of this immediate political context and the broader political fallout of the War on Terror was that ‘regime change’ was pitched as a desirable indirect consequence (not explicit end goal), attached to a solely humanitarian cause.

American Justifications for Intervention in Libya

The impact of this new domestic context on justifications for intervention took two principal forms. First, Obama's apparent hesitancy led to one of his own advisors labelling American strategy as 'leading from behind'. Despite the riposte from the President that the US leads 'from the front' (Lizza 2011), the Obama Administration's initial caution was plain to see. For instance, although clear on the desirability of regime change—insisting Gaddafi had 'lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now' (Obama 2011a)—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton initially refused to commit the United States to enforcing a no-fly zone and explicitly ruled out unilateral action (Clinton 2011a). Second, the Obama Administration was nonetheless forthright in its humanitarian arguments from the outset of the unfolding crisis, playing up the notion and importance of an altruistic policy. One month prior to the implementation of UNSCR 1973, Clinton and Obama condemned 'outrageous and unacceptable' Libyan human rights abuses:

The Libyan government has a responsibility to refrain from violence, to allow humanitarian assistance to reach those in need, and to respect the rights of its people. It must be held accountable for its failure to meet those responsibilities, and face the cost of continued violations of human rights. (Obama 2011b)
Now is the time to stop this unacceptable bloodshed. (Clinton 2011b)

At this stage intervention was clearly justified with recourse to a humanitarian rationale. However, by the end of March, when Obama delivered the definitive statement of US policy, he was careful to justify intervention with reference to both values *and* interests: 'we are naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges. But when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act' (Obama 2011c). Significantly, Obama also clarified how US strategic interests were at stake, referring to the negative consequences of refugees fleeing Libya and putting a strain on the transitions in neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia. He added that if Gaddafi had been allowed to remain in power this would have encouraged other dictators, undermined the credibility of the UN, and 'would have carried a far greater price for America'. This is a common rhetorical strategy in placating doubters of an intervention's merit. The message is clear: act now, to avoid spending more treasure and spilling more blood in the future.

In justifying intervention, however, the American national interest always remained a secondary argument to that of Gaddafi's actions and America's calling to put an end to them. Despite playing up American interests, Obama argued that intervention was nonetheless first and foremost about realizing America's unique responsibilities to fellow humans:

To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and – more profoundly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to

atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refuse to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action. (Obama 2011c)

The second major point to note is that, despite insisting Gaddafi should leave, the Obama Administration avoided calls for a policy of regime change. Throughout the intervention, Obama was at pains to emphasize that what had been done was in support of a popular uprising against Gaddafi, a leader who had forfeited the right to lead his people. But by the end of March, in the context of post-Iraq America, regime change had become controversial and a potential rallying point for political opponents. On the one hand, the likes of John McCain and Joseph Lieberman ‘call[ed] for a strategy in Libya that identifies and achieves U.S. interests and includes the ouster of Gaddafi’ (Liebermann and McCain 2011). On the other hand, Obama faced a backlash from his own party, as well as Democrat and independent voters, who felt he was returning America to the policies of George W. Bush. With the likes of McCain and Liebermann far more supportive of intervention in the first place, Obama had to placate the second group. He did so by suggesting that regime change would be welcomed, but was not American policy towards Libya. He was explicit in stating that:

The task that I assigned our forces – to protect the Libyan people from immediate danger and to establish a no-fly zone – carries with it a U.N. mandate and international support. It’s also what the Libyan opposition asked us to do. If we tried to overthrow Gaddafi by force, our coalition would splinter. We would likely have to put U.S. troops on the ground to accomplish that mission, or risk killing many civilians from the air. The dangers faced by our men and women in uniform would be far greater. So would the costs and our share of the responsibility for what comes next. (Obama 2011c)

Obama was equally clear that the changed context of 2011, in contrast to that of 2001 and 2003, was central to his thinking, language and policy: ‘To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq ... That is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya’ (Obama 2011c).

The refusal to give explicit voice to a policy of regime change through military means had important implications for the nature as well as possibility of intervention. First, it served as a useful justification for the adoption of a broadly ‘Afghan model’ of intervention, with a remote warfare strategy which, once it was over, allowed Vice-President Joe Biden to claim as a measure of success that America ‘didn’t lose a single life’ (Biden 2011). Second, it alleviated the pressure of calls for America to stay the course, after major combat operations had ended. Third, and most importantly, however, it helped to silence those who were most outraged at America’s pre-emptive and unilateral policy of regime change in Iraq (see, for example, Friedman 2011). Obama’s justification for intervention denied these potential opponents resources they could have otherwise used in crafting an effective and socially sustainable rebuttal.

British Justifications for Intervention in Libya

As with the United States, the two principal features of the British case for intervention in Libya were: (i) the strategic rhetorical balancing of calls to protect civilians with the language of the national interest; and (ii) the downplaying of regime change, such that it was framed as an indirect humanitarian outcome, rather than an explicit political aim. Like Obama, Cameron was clear that regime change would be welcomed. However, it was only later that talk of regime change was tempered; in the early stages of justifying intervention, Cameron was far bolder in his calls for Gaddafi's ousting: 'Col Gaddafi's regime must end and he must leave'; 'this is an illegitimate regime that has lost the consent of its people, and our message to Col Gaddafi is simple: go now' (Cameron 2011b). At this stage, Cameron insisted the 'murderous' regime would 'face the justice they deserve'; the message was one of military action, to topple Gaddafi and avert the very 'real danger ... of a humanitarian crisis inside Libya'. It was only later that Cameron would bring his language into line with the lack of public appetite for such a policy, in the wake of Iraq, and the restricted terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 sanctioning the intervention. At this stage, Cameron balanced calls for regime change through military means with calls for intervention on humanitarian grounds. This positioning left Cameron's opponents little room for manoeuvre. During parliamentary debate on the issue of intervention, the Leader of the Opposition was rhetorically co-opted. The use of overt humanitarian reasoning, within the structures and norms of international society, made opposition difficult, helping to ensure the support and/or acquiescence of potential opponents, with key political foes concurring whole-heartedly:

I think that the whole House will endorse the Prime Minister's view that the only acceptable future is one without Colonel Gaddafi and his regime. We welcome what the Prime Minister said about a possible no-fly zone. We also welcome the international isolation of Libya expressed in UN Security Council Resolution 1970, including sanctions and an arms embargo, and the decision to refer the killing of protesters to the International Criminal Court. (Miliband 2011)

However, as the bombing campaign commenced, the contradiction between the civilian protection mandate from UNSCR 1973 and the government's declared position that Gaddafi should go led to questions being raised as to whether Gaddafi himself could be the target of airstrikes. After struggling to overcome this tension, Cameron eventually articulated the following position:

our role is to enforce that UN Security Council Resolution. Many people will ask questions ... about regime change ... I have been clear: I think Libya needs to get rid of Gaddafi. But, in the end, we are responsible for trying to enforce that Security Council resolution; the Libyans must choose their own future.

The UN Resolution ... explicitly does not provide legal authority for action to bring about Gaddafi's removal from power by military means ... but our view is clear: there is no decent future for Libya with Colonel Gaddafi remaining in power. (Cameron 2011c)

In other words, like Obama, Cameron's later justification for intervention in Libya avoided openly articulating a direct political desire to see Gaddafi ousted. The UK's political objective may well have been the removal of Gaddafi, but it was not astute to openly articulate it as such. Talk of 'regime change' had raised the spectre of Iraq in British political discourse. As the bombing of Libya progressed, the toxicity of the term 'regime change' became increasingly apparent. Conservative Member of Parliament John Baron, for example, was outspoken in opposition to the apparent Anglo-American mission creep. First, he explicitly linked interventionist policy in Libya to that of the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, he argued that while the intervention in Libya 'was justified on humanitarian grounds', what the west had actually pursued and delivered was 'the longest assassination attempt in history' (Baron 2011). These reasons explain why, even if 'carrying out the UN resolution and forcing out Gaddafi [were] pretty much the same thing'—they were 'coterminous missions'—the British Government had 'to pretend that they are separate' (see d'Ancona 2011). In this, the British Government was surprisingly successful. The appearance of an indigenized conflict—a civil war in which Britain was neutral beyond a mandate to protect civilians—led Ban Ki-moon to proclaim: 'changes of regime were done by the people, not by the intervention of any foreign forces' (Press Conference, 14 December 2011).

The second interesting component of Cameron's rhetoric for our purposes was his invocation of the British national interest to balance a humanitarian case for war. We do not argue that Cameron believed the national interest was unengaged; we neither claim to know nor require such knowledge for our analysis. Rather, we argue that the national interest was, at least in part, invoked in order to silence those sceptical of an intervention designed solely to 'save strangers'. Replicating Blair's arguments on Kosovo 12 years earlier, Cameron asserted that:

If Gaddafi's attacks on his own people succeed, Libya will once again become a pariah state, festering on Europe's border, a source of instability, exporting strife beyond her borders. A state from which literally hundreds of thousands of citizens could seek to escape, putting huge pressure on us in Europe. (Cameron 2011a)

And, cutting to the heart of arguments centred on realpolitik, Cameron spelt out for the British public why the UK had to take action:

We must remember that Gaddafi is a dictator who has a track record of violence and support for terrorism against our country and against Scotland specifically. The people of Lockerbie ... know what he is capable of. (Cameron 2011a)

His efforts to balance the humanitarian rationale for intervention could hardly have been blunter:

I am clear: taking action in Libya is in our national interest and that's why Britain, with our allies like America and France, and alongside the Arab world, must play our part in responding to this crisis. (Cameron 2011a)

In this rhetorical balancing, Cameron sounded Blairite, repeating the trick of enforced acquiescence through a targeted tactics of justification. On the one hand, the language of defending human rights ensured the majority of backbench Liberal Democrats and Labour MPs supported government policy. On the other hand, attempts to play up the engagement of the British national interest helped to limit criticism from within the Conservative Party and quell support for seemingly legitimate counter-arguments such as those of John Baron. In short, strategic rhetorical balancing helped Cameron to win the war of position and deliver a dominant interventionist policy.

Conclusion

Politicians act instrumentally in choosing to justify interventions with recourse to particular arguments. These efforts go beyond attempting to 'sell' policy at home. Rather, since 9/11, political leaders in the US and UK have employed a 'tactic of justification' that seeks to quell dissent, silence doubters and secure the acquiescence of potential opponents. In addition to its (primary) empirical contribution, then, the article's (secondary) theoretical contribution centres on the identification of a crucial, often unacknowledged, form of rhetorical coercion: strategic balancing. While appeals to the national identity dominate processes of rhetorical coercion and their study, rhetorical balancing is a crucial additional component of crafting coercive policy, capable of winning out in the battle to justify intervention. In this war of position, political leaders pursue a strategic rhetorical balancing of the principal rationale for intervention, in order to deny others access to the discursive space and materials they would require in order to formulate a socially sustainable rebuttal. American and British justifications for intervention in Afghanistan and Libya most certainly made use of the language of national identity and appeals to notions of foundational values under threat. However, in these case studies, strategic rhetorical balancing meant that Blair, Bush, Cameron and Obama all emphasized *secondary* motivations for intervention in an effort to close down the political terrain from which a rhetorical counter-offensive could be launched.

In Afghanistan, Bush spoke of dropping 'bombs' *and* 'food' in order to quell those voices most loudly comparing and equating the events of 9/11 with the human toll that the invasion of Afghanistan would inevitably reap. Likewise, Blair's emphasis on the rationality of intervention, as assessed against the threat to British territorial sovereignty and the national interest, can and should be read as an instrumental attempt to silence and secure the acquiescence of those critics who would otherwise most readily question British involvement. In the case of Libya we see the same underpinning logic of rhetorical coercion, which inspired Obama to balance the humanitarian case for intervention strategically with recourse to the national interest and instrumentally curtail public rhetoric on regime change. While both Obama and Cameron gave voice, principally, to humanitarian concerns, they also felt the need to play up the strategic interests

that Libyan instability impinged upon. These concerns were emphasized primarily to placate those who most feared the costs of another war, following the quagmire of Iraq. Thus, while the Libyan example reverses the emphasis of justifications on display in 2001, the logic of rhetorical coercion holds true.

The implications of this persistent logic are worrying, both at home—concerning issues of democracy and bipartisanship—and abroad—in terms of the nature of international intervention. Our concerns here centre on the impact of strategic rhetorical balancing on: (i) the possibility, nature, effectiveness and ethicality of intervention, if it is shaped by the demands of domestic coercion; and (ii) the health of the marketplace of ideas, if the suffocation of alternative policies is a central component of achieving policy dominance in a democracy. While our argument and use of the phrase ‘balance of rhetoric’ makes no attempt to map onto theories pertaining to a ‘balance of power’, it is certainly true that power is crucial here. Rhetorical coercion, at its most effective, can lead to an imbalance of power within the domestic politics of an interventionist state. This imbalance can lead to hegemony in the production of interventionist discourses, suffocating potentially less violent alternatives. We fear that pursuing a war of position through coercive tactics of justification helps to drown out (useful and often more effective or principled) policy alternatives. We therefore offer a threefold strategy of resistance. A *rebalancing* of rhetoric might usefully be informed by: considerations of the *longue durée* (beyond political short-termism); expansion of the fractures in divergent coalition framings; and/or the immanent critique of justifications wherein policy fails to deliver on promise. These strategies of resistance should follow further research on rhetorical coercion generally and strategic rhetorical balancing specifically.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the journal editors, two anonymous referees and participants at the 2012 BISA-ISA conference for their feedback.

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Notes

1 We use the term 'strategic rhetorical balancing' as entirely distinct from theories pertaining to a balance of power.

2 It would be possible to argue that the War on Terror was perhaps an extreme example of the suffocating and oppressive dominance of official discourse, were it not for the similar experience of the Cold War. The publication of lists of dangerous academics during the War on Terror, for example, can be seen as a ghostly echo of McCarthyism (e.g. Horowitz 2006). These academics were supposedly threatening the United States through their opposition to government policy.

3 Blair would later come to repeat these arguments in post hoc justifications for intervention in Iraq, reminding those who opposed his decision that, had they got their wish, they would live in a world where Saddam Hussein continued his reign of terror over millions of Iraqis.

4 Requiring NATO members to come to the support of any member who is attacked by an external adversary.

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