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Jack Holland and Mike Aaronson

Strategic Rhetorical Balancing and the Tactics of Justification in Afghanistan, Libya and Beyond

Our article (Holland and Aaronson 2014) set out to explore how political elites win arguments. This is an important exploration because, we argue, elected officials in the United States and United Kingdom are not free to pursue *any* foreign policy they wish (Ibid; Holland 2013a, b). In particular, when it comes to questions of military force, intervention, and war, Bush, Blair, Obama and Cameron have been required to craft foreign policy discourse instrumentally in order to account for domestic politics and populations. It is the audience at home that matters. And it is interpretations of the domestic electoral and political landscape that inspires the strategic framing of foreign policy (see also Holland 2010, 2012).

There already exists much work (e.g. Barnett 1999) that considers how it is that elected officials construct arguments in order to appeal to specific domestic audiences, for example, through the invocation of the national identity. Our argument does something slightly different by turning to one of the most interesting areas of Critical Constructivist literature in IR today, which considers processes of rhetorical coercion. Drawing on this literature (e.g. Krebs 2007, Mattern 2005, McDonald and Merefield 2010), we argue that political elites not only frame foreign policy to appeal to core constituencies, but moreover that they employ a tactics of justification for foreign policy that seeks to balance their arguments rhetorically, in order to close down the discursive space from which an opponent might launch a counter-argument (Krebs and Jackson 2007, Krebs and Lobasz 2007, 2009). Potential opponents are deprived of the tools required for the construction of a sustainable counter-narrative; they are silenced, and coerced into acquiescence (ibid.).

Our empirical analysis shows that, in the case of Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011, political elites in the US and UK achieved this rhetorical balancing through the strategic emphasis of secondary justifications for intervention (Holland and Aaronson 2014). National interest-premised justifications were balanced with recourse to humanitarian concerns, and vice versa, in order to deny opponents unhindered access to novel, alternative, positions (ibid.). Very simply, in Afghanistan, it was much harder for opponents to construct alternative policies premised on concerns about the humanitarian costs of military action once political elites had already argued that intervention would deliver vital humanitarian benefits. Likewise, in Libya opponents were left struggling to argue that intervention was not in the national interest, once political elites tactically emphasised this secondary justification for action, alongside ongoing fears of human rights violations (ibid.).

We would do very little differently were we given the chance to revisit the article; however we believe it is imperative to extend the analysis it develops in three ways. First, we have focused on the dominant voices of political elites in power. Studying the dynamics of discursive wars of position at home, between

government and opposition, as well as other groups, such as the media, could usefully complement our original focus. Far from the rational construction of a national interest-premised policy, democratic and electoral dynamics have lain at the heart of many military interventions. Studying more of the central components of the democratic process in the formulation of foreign policy is likely to generate fresh insights.

Second, more work remains to be done in the area of rhetorical coercion. In particular, theorizing the nature and process of rhetorical coercion is a vital area of focus for constructivist research. In particular, the strategic balancing of justifications for war, through the instrumental emphasis of secondary justifications, is a new argument that must be woven into extant research about rhetorical coercion. Likewise, conceptualizing the complex and interwoven relationship of coercion and resonance is an exciting and important area for theoretical innovation. How do political elites simultaneously paint a picture of the world conducive to their chosen policy path, whilst also appealing to important audiences at home and securing the acquiescence of those who would try to argue against? Here, a nuanced understanding of coercion should complement multifaceted understandings of resonance – incorporating elements of appeal, assemblage and affect (Holland and Solomon 2014).

Third, although broad for an article, our focus was necessarily constrained by four states and two wars. Empirically, this work can and should be extended back through history, to explore past wars, as well as forward to the present, given the fierce urgency of understanding discourses of intervention and non-intervention in Syria, as the world's great powers compete in an international discursive war of position. Here, we do intend to develop our work, exploring in detail how it is that interventionist and non-interventionist policies have 'won out' at various points since conflict began in Syria in 2011. The US, UK, Russia and China have all contributed to this international discursive war of position over Syria. In the US and UK, in the face of continuing resistance to intervention from Russia and China, the position of ruling and oppositional parties has shifted through three phases, in 2011-12 as humanitarian concerns were at the fore, in 2012-13 as chemical weapons norms were discussed, and from 2014 as Islamic State has surged to preeminence. Synchronic and diachronic analysis of this war of position is required to understand how it is that the people of Syria have simply been left to their fate.

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