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Ambiguous specificity: The production of foreign policy bullshit in electoral contexts

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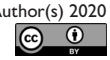
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Abstract

This article conceptualises the production of foreign policy bullshit in electoral contexts as a result of contending incentives towards ambiguity and specificity. Candidates must speak to widely divergent, even contradictory, policy ideas to maximise voter share in primaries and elections. At the same time, overly broad rhetoric or evasion risks signalling incompetence and unsuitability for office. Candidates are thus incentivized to hide the compromise character of their suggestions behind hyper-specific rhetoric. Following literature from philosophy and linguistics, this is a form of deception best captured by 'bullshit', that is, when the candidate simply does not care too much whether what they are saying matches with objective reality but does care that this inattention to truth is not known to the audience. This dynamic is illustrated in a case study on the 2015/2016 elections. Specifically, bipartisan support for a US-enforced no-fly zone in Syria cannot be explained by the tool's likely utility and effectiveness. Instead, the tool's value for many candidates lay in its effective communication of contradictory policy ideas. The tool allowed presidential hopefuls to appear resolute yet responsible, purposive yet pragmatic, idealist, and realist, while also signalling specificity and thus foreign policy expertise.

Keywords

bullshit, elections, foreign policy, rhetoric, Syria

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Introduction

This article argues that (at times bipartisan) support for unsuitable foreign policy instruments is best explained through looking at how candidate rhetoric must strike a balance between ambiguity and specificity in US electoral contexts. Ambiguity stems from the need to compromise between widely divergent audiences and policy ideas, while specificity signals expertise and suitability for office. This articles thus explores the interlinkage between electoral politics, rhetoric, and foreign policy. Like other articles in this special issue, it illuminates the incentives and constraints presidential candidates grapple

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with when speaking about foreign policy (Boys, 2020; Lacatus and Meibauer, 2020; Payne, 2020).

To this end, following Frankfurt (2005), I develop the concept of 'bullshit' in contrast to erroneous judgement and lying. I illustrate the electoral dynamics at work in its production in a case study on no-fly zone proposals for Syria in the 2015/2016 US presidential elections. For the candidates, the no-fly zone was valuable because it exhibits military-strategic characteristics that render it sufficiently ambiguous to effectively signal diverse, indeed contradictory policy ideas. It enabled them to appear resolute yet responsible, purposive yet pragmatic, idealist and realist *simultaneously*. And yet, suggesting it as a seemingly specific policy, perhaps counter-intuitively, made the detection of its strategic uselessness in Syria less likely.

A no-fly zone denotes a space within a state's sovereign territory in which another state (or coalition) patrols to deny the use of that (air) space and ensure implementation of whatever rules the intervener set to hold therein. It can fulfil multiple strategic functions, including air support, punishment, and aerial occupation (Benard, 2004: 455). However, numerous authors suggest that the no-fly zone is neither strategically optimal nor even appropriate for intervention and conflict management, and that it is unsuitable for the protection of civilians. Its uses in Iraq and Bosnia supported this claim empirically (Brattebo, 2006; Frelick, 1992; Jakobsen, 1998; Roberts, 1993). In the 2011 Libya intervention, the no-fly zone proved ineffective as soon as it established a shaky status quo, and was replaced by a more aggressive air campaign (Lindström and Zetterlund, 2012). Authors evaluating the tool's effectiveness (Angle, 1999; Benard, 2004; Francis, 1999; Gibbons, 2002; Knights, 2011; Kramlinger, 2001; Renner, 2011) stress that no-fly zones are 'insufficient to accomplish the desired ends' in conflict management because of the 'risk of civilian casualties, environmental factors, and the inherent limitations of airpower' (Renner, 2011: 2).

When a no-fly zone was suggested for Syria, the US refrained from imposing it largely because of geostrategic reasons (Carter and Dunford, 2016; Department of Defense/Press Operations, 2015; Gutterman, 2013; Johnson and Mueen, 2012: 4; Zenko, 2016a, 2016b). Analysts and decision-makers agreed early on that 'a no-fly zone [was] unlikely to alleviate the suffering of ordinary Syrians and may potentially be harmful' (Beehner, 2016) because it 'cannot effectively counter ground-based lethality' (Phillips, 2016: 182; also: Carter and Dunford, 2015; Dempsey, 2013; Lynch, 2012; Nuland, 2011). And yet, the no-fly zone continued to play a role in foreign policy debates and had bipartisan support during the 2015/2016 election. Why do candidates, knowing that no-fly zones may be ineffective or downright counter-productive, suggest the tool for conflict management and intervention? And what does this tell us about how foreign policy proposals are used rhetorically in elections?

I argue below that inappropriate policies may persist in electoral contexts if they allow the communication of usually incommensurable ideas, all the while they cloak this compromise character and factual emptiness behind a veil of specificity. The policy's electoral value becomes detached from its military-strategic or other utility in solving the problem at hand; its use can then be conceptualised as a form of 'bullshit' used primarily for electoral posturing on foreign policy issues. In the 2015/2016 elections, the no-fly zone was ambiguous in that it could signal leadership as well as restraint, moral responsibility as well as the prudence not to risk American lives, the belief in the US military's primacy as well as fear of 'slippery slopes' and 'mission creep'. And yet, it sounded specific enough to signal expertise and leadership.

Foreign policy bullshit between ambiguity and specificity

Some mismatch between what the United States can do and what candidates say they want might be expected. Relevant literature details the promises, half-truths, and outright lies candidates communicate when they seek to get elected (Aldrich et al., 2006; Iyengar and Simon, 2000; Lesperance, 2016; Milner and Tingley, 2015; Nincic and Hinckley, 1991). Candidates do not have the advantages in terms of available information that presidents enjoy, so factual inaccuracy may erroneously occur (as suggested below, in the example here under investigation this seems unlikely for most if not all candidates). Also, they do not (yet) face the burdens of office. They thus have more leeway to suggest improbable or impossible alternatives which they deem likely to garner votes. This leeway exists especially because foreign policy issues rarely, if ever, dominate elections. Also, the electorate tends to lack information on them and prioritise domestic matters (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 7). This allows candidates to emphasise or downplay foreign policy concerns according to their own strengths, interests, and perception of the electorate's concerns, to establish credibility as a potential commander-in-chief (Boys, 2020).

Still, there are limits to what candidates can get away with. For example, incumbents are measured in their foreign policy performance against their campaign promises (Tavits, 2007). Self-interested leaders may want to avoid overpromising during elections as backing away incurs audience costs (Payne, 2020). Similarly, lies are risky, although perhaps decreasingly so in an age of fake news and increased polarisation. Suggesting something that the speaker believes to be untrue may have short-term benefits but entails risks of being caught out and having to subsequently explain or obfuscate the lie.

Rather, especially when coercively prompted (e.g. in a televised debate) or otherwise expected to provide an opinion, candidates are incentivised to evade answering truthfully, for example, by bullshitting their way through (Carson, 2010: 60; Petrocelli, 2018). 'Bullshit' is characterised by a loose connection to truth: a candidate simply does not care too much whether what they are saying matches with objective reality, which differentiates this type of speech from lying as well as hypocrisy (Meibauer, 2016: 71; Petrocelli, 2018; Saul, 2012; Stokke, 2018). The speaker does, however, care that this inattention to truth is not known to the audience (Meibauer, 2016: 71). Bullshitting is, therefore, connected to an intention to deceive on the part of the speaker, namely, to misrepresent their statement's truthfulness (for an alternative position, cf. Carson, 2016; Fallis, 2015). The speaker's performance 'must maintain the pretense of conveying information, hiding his lack of justification for this information from the audience, and perhaps even from himself' (Seymour, 2014: 573). Bullshitting is about creating the right impression rather than persuasion or argumentative exchange (Seymour, 2014: 577). To do so successfully, I argue that candidates must balance between contending pressures towards both ambiguity and specificity. This clarifies the function of bullshit in electoral contexts as well as its form (Frankfurt, 2005: 1).

Ambiguous rhetoric avoids being 'pinned down' to concrete promises or suggestions, fact-checked or disproven (Aragonès and Neeman, 2000: 184; Duval, 2019; Milita et al., 2017; Tomz and Houweling, 2009; VanSickle-Ward, 2014). Specific stands are then only taken in 'obscure forums, where special audiences demand them and where they are easily missed by the general public' (Page, 1976: 745). Ambiguity may even attract voters (Tomz and Houweling, 2009). Indeed, as many voters lack interest and knowledge of foreign policy, some candidates refrain entirely from engaging in

detailed discussions about it (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 7–11; Page, 1976: 745). Correspondingly, Frankfurt (2005) provides the example of a Fourth-of-July speech. Foreign policy rhetoric then takes on a ceremonial nature, consisting of 'presidential'-sounding stock phrases that 'protect against reality' (Wander, 1984: 339). Such ambiguity is attractive during elections, when candidates are faced with the difficulty of signalling commitment to different ideas simultaneously to maximise their support (Downs, 1957: 132–139; Page, 1976: 742).

This rests on the assumption that rhetoric turns underlying ideas into arguments, that is, 'into contestable propositions' (Finlayson, 2007: 552). It can then be understood as a *conduit* of ideas that enables political discourse, which in turn consists of the exchange of (at times, incommensurable) ideas (Finlayson, 2007: 552; Lakoff, 1995). Regarding US foreign policy, for example, after the Cold War, the United States faced peripheral civil conflicts where vital interests were not obviously at stake. And yet, intervention proponents continued to make cases for involvement. This had led numerous authors to identify different ideational 'camps', loosely associated with voter groups and foreign policy elites, that compete over the interpretation of geostrategic incentives, interests, and appropriate ends (Gholz et al., 1997; Mead, 2002; Posen and Ross, 1996). The association of such groups with an ideational camp is fairly stable, and may be linked to socio-educational background, economic situation, geographic situatedness, or other identity markers (for a review, see Aldrich et al., 2006: 478–484). Siding with one camp or partial audience over another may be advantageous where it rallies one's base or draws clear-cut differences that play to the candidate's strengths. However, it may incur electoral costs – especially on foreign policy, where electoral preferences are both unclear and less important. Candidates may thus be incentivized to avoid specificity and offer satisficing solutions across ideational camps, not least also because (some) voters reward bipartisanship in foreign affairs (Aragonès and Neeman, 2000: 184; Page, 1976: 749).

However, overly ambiguous and evasive tactics may be problematic. The speaker risks being pressed on vague rhetoric, especially in situations where debate dynamics are difficult to control (Page, 1976: 749). Audiences may see through well-trodden verbiage because of, albeit limited, 'epistemic awareness' of electoral dynamics and bullshit production (Meibauer, 2016; Milita et al., 2017: 49, Seymour, 2014: 574). Voters may prefer specificity to reduce the uncertainty associated with vague positions, and may fill up the gap left by ambiguity with alternatively available information (Aragonès and Neeman, 2000: 184; Milita et al., 2017: 49). Importantly, in the context of elections, foreign policy rhetoric is aimed not only at positioning vis-à-vis a counterpart, but also at convincing the broader electorate of the candidate's expertise, authority, character, and suitability for the presidency (Benoit et al., 2003: 347). If specific knowledge and proposals signal competence and expertise on a topic and make follow-up questions less likely, this provides a rationale for the necessary specificity of policy suggestions (Page, 1976: 750; Rudd, 1989). Specificity, however, is difficult to attain in complex environments, especially by less-experienced or informed candidates.

The incentives to ambiguity and specificity are usually presented as a trade-off problem between contrasting strategies in relevant literature (Aragonès and Neeman, 2000; Downs, 1957; Milita et al., 2017; Rudd, 1989; Shepsle, 1972; Tomz and Houweling, 2009). Unless in exceptional cases of consensus, there are no specific rhetorical devices that allow signalling diverse ideas effectively, that is, so that they do not have to commit to either only one (which may alienate audiences), or too obviously to multiple ideas (which runs the risk of apparent contradictions).

This ignores that candidates may be incentivised to use *overly* precise suggestions to hide their ambiguity and indeed factual emptiness. Proposals thus take on a *hyper-specific* nature, comparable with adverts that use made-up medicinal statistics to flog snake oil. This can persuade a trusting audience of the speaker's evidence for their statements even though that evidence is not adequate to standards of truthful speaking: the speaker produces bullshit (Meibauer, 2016: 75–77). Uncertainty and complexity in the respective issue area makes ignorant or indifferent audiences more likely (Seymour, 2014: 578). This increases the likelihood that hyper-specific bullshit, that is, the deceptive invocation of seemingly detailed proposals that hide their ambiguity and factual emptiness, is successful (cf. Seymour, 2014: 586; also Petrocelli, 2018). Again, this concerns impression rather than factual content. Hyper-specific bullshit helps sell the speaker's competence because it sounds detailed, not because it actually is. The importance of such specific-yet-ambiguous concepts in political debates increases the more uncertain actors are about the consequences of different policies, as is often the case in foreign policy (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 173ff.).

I suggest in the below that candidates in the 2015/2016 elections suggested a no-fly zone not because the tool represents an actual political agenda or solution to the problem at hand (at least not primarily because it does). No-fly zone proposals instead signal a *hyper-specific* catch-all compromise for otherwise insurmountable ideational contradiction. Given this incentive structure, it seems likely that once contenders have identified such a rhetorical tool, they stick with it even if its real-world implications are outright contradictory to geopolitical or tactical incentives, national interests, and conflict management. Candidates are interested in obscuring this rationale from their audiences, which fits with the definition of bullshit offered above.

Ambiguous *and* specific: The no-fly zone in the 2015/2016 elections

I argue that in the 2015/2016 presidential elections, a no-fly zone for Syria had bipartisan support not because it was a suitable tool for conflict management, but because it could accommodate critics and proponents of intervention to build wider electoral coalitions. This is because its characteristics are inherently malleable and open to interpretation (Meibauer, 2017).

No-fly zones capture the opponent's air space and destroy military assets that threaten air superiority. In other ways, however, no-fly zones are more limited, and signal restraint and passivity. For one, there is an expectation that the tool targets only a specific part of adversarial capabilities. It is rule-bound and geographically limited. If the opponent complies with prescribed rules and does not threaten air superiority, a no-fly zone seems to be a passive-defensive instrument. In its narrower interpretation, it freezes a status quo. Theoretically, it is easily retractable, yet flexible enough to enable further coercive measures. Most importantly, no-fly zones are cheap compared with other tools (e.g. full air campaigns) given infrastructure to enforce them (air bases or carriers). They can be implemented quickly all the while own assets remain removed from the theatre. There is a clear expectation that no-fly zones rarely result in loss of own materiel or life, making their implementation a nearly riskless 'zero-casualty' mission. This roadmap can be applied schematically regardless of whether the tool contradicts factual information. The no-fly zone is deceptively simple but also *hyper-specific*. Because of its malleability, it allowed politicians to rhetorically solve a political problem, namely, to express a range of incommensurable ideas simultaneously. Its

invocation was thus detached from its military-strategic value and indeed from any detailed planning or long-term strategy. In the 2015/2016 elections, the no-fly zone was used to signal catch-all ideational compromise in domestic (electoral) politics even though it was not, and could not be, an actual policy option.

Of course, the no-fly zone need not be the only foreign policy tool that fits these characteristics, although its invocation in electoral contexts is surprisingly consistent. For example, in 2007/2008, the no-fly zone had similarly balanced ambiguity and specificity for presidential candidates. Then-candidate Hillary Clinton thought a no-fly zone was needed in Sudan because the Sudanese government bombed villages, and downing Sudanese planes violating a hypothetical no-fly zone was 'the only way to get their attention' (C-SPAN/PBS, 2007; Flint, 2007). Under the same electoral pressures, the Democrat Obama and Republican McCain campaigns had agreed with Clinton (Blanchard, 2012: 27; Rice, 2007). The no-fly zone was also a go-to talking point during the 1991/1992 elections contested between incumbent George H.W. Bush and Democrat candidate Bill Clinton. The latter sought to criticise the former's reluctant foreign policy in Iraq and especially in Bosnia by endorsing US-enforced no-fly zones (Fulwood and Chen, 1992).

Still, while sanctions may not be sufficiently active to offer much to intervention supporters (and do not evoke the types of imagery candidates may crave), safe areas, buffer zones, security assistance (e.g. training and/or arming rebel forces), and especially Special Operations forces and drone strikes may exhibit similar dynamics (Brooks, 2016; Holland, 2012). Here, further research might illuminate how military-strategic characteristics map onto electoral pressures outlined above. The relative remoteness of air power likely adds to the perception of limited risk necessary to bridge between a pro- and an anti-intervention stance. This may be connected to specifically American ways of (talking about) warfare (e.g. Buley, 2007; Echevarria, 2014), and thus limit this argument's generalisability.

In 2011, shortly after the Obama administration had implemented the Libyan no-fly zone, protesters-turned-rebels took control of regions across Syria (Phillips, 2016; Sorenson, 2016). Presumably influenced by the Libyan intervention still fresh on their minds, commentators and politicians began debating a no-fly zone to protect protesters against the regime's increasingly indiscriminate crackdown (Phillips, 2016: 65–67). Rebels and opposition groups also called for a no-fly zone as they hoped it would provide them with greater freedom to operate, encourage defections, and further uprisings, and level the playing field (Phillips, 2016: 113). Indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets provided the clearest military-strategic rationale for a no-fly zone limited to northern and southern Syria.[1]

Obama had raised hopes of intervention in Summer 2011, although he seemed to favour restraint (Goldberg, 2016). Indeed, intervention had cross-party supporters within the administration as well as Congress who disliked what they saw as ineffective 'aspirational rhetoric' (Munoz, 2013; Phillips, 2016: 178; Thompson, 2013). Their opponents argued that with limited interests and a complex situation on the ground, these proponents had failed to suggest clear alternatives. Some in the administration worried about another failed state in the Middle East through intervention and wanted to stick to a narrative of regional disentanglement. When Clinton, Panetta and Petraeus suggested a 'muscular' plan on Syria, they were 'shot down' by Obama's domestic advisors, and subsequently replaced (Phillips, 2016: 178; Sorenson, 2016: 97). Beyond contingency plans that also involved a no-fly zone, this did not result in clearer strategy (Hafezi and Solomon, 2013). Obama's non-intervention stance regarding the 'red line' finally disillusioned intervention proponents (Phillips, 2016: 169).

By the time, the election campaigns started in 2015/2016, possibilities for a no-fly zone in Syria were severely limited, to the extent that a no-fly zone would be if not outright impossible then extremely costly politically and strategically. Accordingly, popular support steadily declined before 2015 (ABC News/Washington Post, 2012; Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2014). And yet, at a time when military intervention against the Assad regime was next to impossible, the no-fly zone did *not* disappear from political debates. Instead, it was presented as a serious policy option in both parties' primaries and the presidential debates. I suggest that, at least in this case, this cannot be explained simply by reference to incomplete information or 'genuine' mistake. Undoubtedly, some of the candidates did not know themselves what exactly a no-fly zone was or would mean for Syria. More importantly, they did not particularly care. Rather, they cared about what proposing the no-fly zone would signal to voters. The tool became shorthand for nuanced but determined, responsible but firm policy. It was sufficiently different from seemingly ineffective sanctions. Its past application in Libya lent it evocative potential. Candidates across the aisle seeking coalitions across ideational camps in their respective parties grasped the attractiveness of an ambiguous yet specific tool. The no-fly zone's characteristics made it ideal for political posturing.

In the Republican primaries, the no-fly zone was used primarily to oppose Obama's unwillingness to use military force or demonstrate 'resolve' against Russia. Of the initial candidates, only two opposed a no-fly zone on principle: Rand Paul called it a 'recipe for disaster', and Ted Cruz suggested the United States had 'no business' in Syria's civil war (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015). Both aimed at capturing, at this early stage, different ideational camps in the Republican Party, that is, the libertarian and non-interventionist, non-establishment wings, respectively. Most others, as Ben Carson commented, tried to capture a feeling of frustration that the United States was 'only reacting when somebody does something' (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015). Chris Christie agreed:

> And if you think that a no-fly zone is a reckless policy, you're welcome to your opinion. But how is it working so far? As we have 250,000 Syrians murdered, slaughtered; millions running around the world, running for their lives. It's not working. We need to try something else. And that is not reckless (Washington Post/Team Fix, 2015).

Per John Kasich, the United States should show 'moral leadership' and 'prevent further escalation and suffering by civilians and refugees' through a no-fly zone. Similarly, Marco Rubio demanded a coalition-enforced no-fly zone to protect civilians. Lindsey Graham, known for hawkish foreign policy positions, had already suggested in 2013 that 'vital national interests' were at stake, and that a no-fly zone could 'end the war' because it would neutralise the Syrian air force: 'We can crater the runways. There are four air bases he uses. We can stop the planes from flying. We can shoot planes down without having one boot on the ground' (Everett, 2013). This demonstrated a good understanding of how a no-fly zone operates tactically, and also mischaracterised the war and what a no-fly zone could achieve in it.

Graham called a no-fly zone a 'great relief', highlighting humanitarian aspects (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015). Christie agreed on the no-fly zone's role in conflict resolution generally (Washington Post/Team Fix, 2016a), and doubled down on military aggressiveness regarding Russia: 'My first phone call would be to Vladimir, and I'd say to him', 'Listen, we're enforcing this no-fly zone [. . .] And I mean we're enforcing it against anyone, including you. So don't try me. Don't try me'. 'Cause I'll do it' (Kaplan, 2015), even if it meant war with Russia (Washington Post/Team Fix, 2015). Even moderate Kasich agreed:

'You enter that no-fly zone, you enter at your own peril' (Kaplan, 2015). Jeb Bush highlighted the no-fly zone's humanitarian aspects, and how it would help refugee management (Washington Post/Team Fix, 2015), and also said it should be directed against Russia (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015).

These candidates' use of the no-fly zone communicates vague, even contradictory ideas about appropriate strategy rather than an actual policy suggestion. For most Republican candidates, the no-fly zone ticked all boxes: leadership, resolve, humanitarian responsibility, refugee management, opposition to Russia, and no-boots-on-the-ground use of force. The no-fly zone became a *symbolic* tool with a high degree of semantic openness, including abstract ideas in a specific manner (Selchow, 2017: 47). As such, it was attractive for those candidates wanting to demonstrate their foreign policy credentials while jostling in early polls for moderate as well as neo-conservative voters. This included Bush, Christie, Kasich, and Rubio (CNN, 2015b).

Even candidates who did not originally have a pronounced foreign policy vision had to declare themselves: Carson and Fiorina both fell in line, with the latter suggesting the no-fly zone is 'a tricky manoeuvre, it's a dangerous manoeuvre, but it's a manoeuvre that we must undertake' (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015; Washington Post/Team Fix, 2015). Even Donald Trump, banking on his 'politainer' persona rather than convincing voters of his foreign policy credentials, was drawn into the no-fly zone debate (Moon, 2019: 2). When prompted, he commented: '[A no-fly zone] does not sound like me very much, but I want to sit back and I want to see what happens' (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015). He later promised to build a 'big, beautiful safe zone' to stem refugee flows (Key, 2015). By early 2016, Trump was the candidate to beat, and dominated Republican foreign policy debates (CNN, 2016a); the no-fly zone's electoral utility waned as it became clear that big-tent Republicanism across ideational camps was a losing hand.

In the Democratic primaries, the candidates also employed the no-fly zone as an empty signifier of political position. They aimed to differentiate their respective own stance from the Obama administration, while avoiding any notion that further involvement would mean 'boots on the ground' (*The New York Times*, 2016). This was a problem particularly for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate to beat, who used the no-fly zone to signal the resolve to 'stand up to Russia' as well as a pragmatic policy of refugee management and humanitarian responsibility' (Seitz-Wald, 2015), to 'stop the carnage on the ground and from the air' (Kaplan and Andrews, 2015). Notably, she thus positioned against what she had expressed in 2013 on the dangers of a no-fly zone and the dissimilarity of Syria to Libya (Norton, 2016).

In the first primary debate, Clinton explained regarding Russia's president Putin: 'We have to stand up to his bullying, and specifically in Syria, it is important [. . .] And, to– provide safe zones so that people are not going to have to be flooding out of Syria at the rate they are' (CNN, 2015a). This allowed Clinton to position as a pragmatic diplomat. Later, she added: '[Why] I have advocated that the no-fly zone – which of course would be in a coalition – be put on the table is because I'm trying to figure out what leverage we have to get Russia to the table [. . .]' (CNN, 2015a). She reiterated in an exchange with debate host Martha Raddatz:

> Clinton: [. . .] [O]ne of the reasons why I have advocated for a no-fly zone is in order to create those safe refuges within Syria, to try to protect people on the ground both from Assad's forces, who are continuing to drop barrel bombs, and from ISIS. And of course, it has to be de-conflicted

with the Russians, who are also flying in that space. [. . .] A no-fly zone would prevent the outflow of refugees and give us a chance to have some safe spaces.

Raddatz: Secretary Clinton, I'd like to go back to that if I could. ISIS doesn't have aircraft, Al Qaida doesn't have aircraft. So would you shoot down a Syrian military aircraft or a Russian airplane?

Clinton: I do not think it would come to that. We are already de-conflicting air space. We know . . .

Raddatz: But isn't that a decision you should make now, whether . . .

Clinton: No, I don't think so. [. . .] I am advocating the no-fly zone both because I think it would help us on the ground to protect Syrians; I'm also advocating it because I think it gives us some leverage in our conversations with Russia [. . .] The no-fly zone, I would hope, would be also shared by Russia [. . .] (CBS News, 2015b).

Clinton had history regarding no-fly zones; as outlined above, she had suggested one for Darfur in 2008. The no-fly zone she proposed for Syria in 2015/2016 again signified a catch-all solution to political, diplomatic, and humanitarian challenges: specific yet ambiguous, and therefore ideal as a soundbite. President Obama observed as much, saying that 'there's a difference between running for president and being president' in response to Clinton's suggestions (Baker, 2015). In the Democratic primaries, these contradictions did not seem to hurt Clinton: she consistently outpolled the other candidates on foreign policy competence; with Bernie Sanders a distant second (CBS News, 2015a; CNN, 2015c). She also performed best in a cross-poll on foreign policy against all remaining Republican candidates in early 2016 (CNN, 2016b).

Sanders warned of over-engagement and the risks of intervention: 'First of all, [Clinton] is talking about [. . .] a no-fly zone in Syria, which I think is a very dangerous situation. Could lead to real problems' (CNN, 2015a). He would not support a no-fly zone 'which the president certainly does not support' because 'it will cost an enormous sum of money [and] runs the risk of getting us sucked into perpetual warfare in that region' (Washington Post/Team Fix, 2016b). This attacked the flank Clinton left open. Sanders could portray her as a reckless warmonger, a trope already established for Clinton, deflecting from his own, ambiguous position. It also allowed him to emphasise domestic economic policies, where he had apparent strengths and could offer detailed proposals. In similar contrast to Clinton, Martin O'Malley presented as pragmatist in line with Obama to win primary voters by association:

> I believe that, as president, I would not be so quick to pull for a military tool. I believe that a no-fly zone in Syria [. . .] would be a mistake. You have to enforce no-fly zones, and I believe, especially with the Russian air force in the air, it could lead to an escalation because of an accident [. . .]. I support President Obama. I think we have to play a long game (CNN, 2015a).

In the debates between Clinton and Trump, the no-fly zone continued to be a favourite policy position and a go-to talking point. Clinton tied the humanitarian situation in Syria to Russian involvement. She advocated for a no-fly zone 'not only to help protect the Syrians and prevent the constant outflow of refugees, but to frankly gain some leverage on both the Syrian government and the Russians' (Politico, 2016b). She explained that 'we need some leverage with the Russians because they are not going to come to the

negotiating table for a diplomatic resolution unless there is leverage over them [. . .] I want to emphasize that what is at stake here is the ambitions and aggressiveness of Russia' (Politico, 2016b).

Clinton knew the Obama administration's rationale for not using the no-fly zone: geostrategic constraints made intervening against Russia in Syria prohibitively risky. Indeed, senior Obama administration officials doubted that she would ever implement her stance (Jaffe, 2016; Wong, 2016). When pushed on this contradiction and whether she would down Russian planes violating a no-fly zone, Clinton insisted:

> [. . .] I think a no-fly zone could save lives and hasten the end of the conflict. I am well aware of the really legitimate concerns you have expressed from both the president and the general. This would not be done just on the first day. This would take a lot of negotiation and it would also take making it clear to the Russians and the Syrians that our purpose is to provide safe zones on the ground [. . .] So I think we could strike a deal and make it very clear to the Russians and Syrians that this was something that we believe the best interests of the people on the ground [. . .] It would help us in the fight against ISIS (Politico, 2016b).

It is the inherent flexibility of the no-fly zone, its limited yet forceful character that makes it a perfect political soundbite. In this, it differs both from sanctions and tools often perceived as more aggressive, like drone strikes. For Clinton, the tool stands for an interventionist, yet responsible policy. In one sweep, the no-fly zone can solve all problems in Syria: it seemed an appropriate way to signal protection of civilians, coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, solving the refugee crisis, as well as determination to fight 'the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), without having to commit to any actual conflict resolution strategy. Trump, in his own way, seemed to express something similar:

> She talks really tough against Putin and against Assad. She talks in favor of the rebels. She doesn't even know who the rebels are. [. . .] Every time we take rebels whether it's in Iraq or anywhere else, we're arming people. And you know what happens? They end up being worse than the people. Look at what she did in Libya with Qaddafi [. . .] It's a mess (Politico, 2016a).

Still, Clinton's perceived expertise and leadership on foreign policy and on Syria consistently outpolled Trump (Fox News, 2016; NBC News/WSJ, 2016). Whether to intervene against Assad divided even the Republican ticket (Politico, 2016a). The 2015/2016 debates saw a disconnect between the likelihood that the tool could be employed, and the way candidates continued to present it as a policy option. This may mark the full shift of the no-fly zone from a military-strategic tool to shorthand used to signal compromise between contrasting political positions.

In electoral contexts, the no-fly zone has grown into a particular role – because of its characteristics, the tool appears attractive to candidates intent on disentangling themselves from ideational divides. The no-fly zone could not easily be portrayed as a policy option for Syria. And yet, that is, what candidates across the bipartisan divide tried to do. The no-fly zone has become a compromise solution to foreign policy issues in which unclear interests, concern about risky over-extension combine with ideational commitments to leadership, humanitarian responsibility, and belief in technological superiority. Rhetorical use of the tool was detached from its military-strategic value. No-fly zone proposals were foreign policy bullshit, hyper-specific to hide their compromise character and factual emptiness behind a veil of seemingly impressive detail.

Conclusion

Contrasting pressures to ambiguity and specificity in electoral contexts incentivise candidates to produce bullshit by means of *hyper-specific* policy proposals. Those are aimed at bridging between insurmountable ideational divides and signalling issue expertise and suitability for office. In so seeing to maximise potential voter shares, candidates do not (primarily) care whether their proposal actually solves the political issue at hand.

I illustrated this electoral dynamic in a case study on no-fly zone proposals in the 2015/2016 presidential elections. The no-fly zone allowed candidates to pander to both proponents and opponents of intervention, specifically to the different ideas they hold, simultaneously. It took on an idealised, symbolic nature in political debate which makes it attractive as a political 'keyword' (Selchow, 2017: 48). This was especially important for candidates who needed to keep together broad electoral coalitions, for example, in the case of the Democratic Party, liberal elites as well as more domestically oriented voter groups. Employing no-fly zones avoided the trappings of empty rhetoric when faced with an epistemically aware audience: namely, it was a *specific* suggestion, which signalled expertise and (thereby) suitability for office. This need for specificity may well be pertinent for Trump's Democratic challenger in the 2020 election, as evinced by the influence of, for example, Elizabeth Warren's detailed planning focus.

Indeed, this dynamic has consequences beyond electoral politics, most notably where no-fly zones and similar tools are actually employed (rather than only promised). Where the routine invocation of no-fly zones as a form of US military power serve to convince important parts of the American public that intervention can be pursued on the cheap, and in ways that appeal to liberals interested in multilateral leadership and humanitarian responsibility, neoconservatives seeking democracy promotion and primacy, as well as those inclined to no-boots-on-the-ground restraint and isolationism, they reproduce a consensus around liberal hegemony. They may also be emblematic of the marginalisation of diplomacy and naturalisation of permanent warfare observed elsewhere (Brooks, 2016; Holland, 2012; Walt, 2018).[2]

My aim is not to suggest simplistically that all candidates are liars or cynical populists. Rather, pressures towards both ambiguity and specificity make the production of foreign policy bullshit more likely. Such deceptive rhetoric is thus the output of incentives embedded in the electoral system. It exists beyond the realm of foreign policy, as suggested by Trump's more recent forays into hyper-specific medical 'advice' during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Where successful, it legitimises untruthfulness, erodes the quality of public debate, and is thus harmful to a functioning democracy. In turn, uncritical, indifferent, or ignorant audiences make it difficult to hold candidates to account (Seymour, 2014: 575). Electoral dynamics that incentivise candidates to latch onto nonsensical proposals because they appeal to their audiences is problematic where the institutionalised feedback mechanisms, that is, media coverage, audience backlash and electoral defeat, are not operating well enough. Evidently, whether candidates suggested no-fly zones did not solely determine their electoral success. However, the combination of ideational sincerity, looseness with truth and hyper-specificity can accumulate to harm the credibility of the democratic process. It can also perpetuate false perceptions of the United States' role in the world, its interests, and actions. If impression management rather than genuine argumentation predominates elections, the electoral process is more open to takeover by populists, hypocrites, and amateurs.

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Notes

1. For an overview of no-fly zone tactics, see Harmer (2015). A no-fly zone would have likely relieved rebel forces and made humanitarian access easier. However, the conflict was largely fought on the ground. Most civilian deaths came from small arms fire and artillery shelling rather than aerial bombardment (Zenko, 2016a).
2. I thank Reviewer 1 for this point.

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