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GREAT POWER POLITICS AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Andreas Antoniades[1], Alister Miskimmon[2] and Ben O'Loughlin[2]

system when challengers to hegemonic powers emerge. Strategic narratives are an important tool which must be considered alongside material resources as a determinant of whether emerging great powers are able to shape a new systemic alignment. It is through the use of strategic narratives that emerging and great powers can project their values and interests in order to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate. These are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about 'who we are' and 'what kind of system we want'.

Complicating this picture, however, is a complex new media ecology which makes the process of projecting strategic narratives an increasingly difficult one. This transformed communications environment means narrative strategies must account for an extended global media 'menu' of channels, the recording, archiving and unforeseeable dissemination of digital content, and the unpredictable presence of dispersed, participatory media which can undermine or disrupt their narratives. As such, the patterns of communication in the international system become intrinsically less predictable, and major powers will have to adapt their processes of narrative formation and projection. Hurrell writes, 'all human societies, including international society, rely on historical stories about themselves to legitimize notions of where they are and where they might be going. An important element of International Relations is therefore the uncovering of actors' understandings of international politics and the ways in which these understandings have been gathered into intelligible patterns, traditions, or ideologies' (Hurrell, 2007: 17). In this context, we seek not only to uncover actors' understandings, interests and goals, but also to examine the complex ways in which these narratives operate and the kind of 'life-on-their-own' they acquire once they put out at the public realm.

Two important examples have occurred in recent US-Middle East relations. On May 8, 2006, President Ahmadinejad of Iran sent a letter to President Bush of the US. It was the first official communiqué from the Iranian government to the US since diplomatic ties were broken in 1979. This 18 page letter was delivered by Swiss go-betweens, but critically it was also published online. While Bush himself did not reply, US officials dismissed the letter at the same time as individuals around the world were responding through online chatrooms and news blogs. Ahmedinejad took a risk, not knowing how his letter would be responded to, but the transparency of his communication caused a problem for the Bush administration (Goodall, Jr. et al., 2008; Sreberny, 2008). On 4 June 2009 President Obama made a speech in Cairo, Egypt to 'the Muslim world', and he made great use of social media to enlarge the audience. His words were disseminated through Facebook and Myspace, text messages and tweets, live streaming on the White House and State Department websites, and it was broadcast live on Al Jazeera and other Arabic television channels. Translations in multiple languages were offered. Instead of simply 'getting a message out', the White House press secretary, Robert Gibbs, spoke of a generating 'continuing dialogue' – in other words, sustained two-way communication in which Obama and his administration would listen as well as speak. This marketing effort exemplifies the way a new media environment has changed how political leaders can

manage the expectation and responses to their speeches. The speech was extensively trailed, through pre-departure interviews with NPR and the BBC, to hint at what audiences around the world might expect. The relentless self- and official commentary through tweets enable interpretation to be subtlety steered as the speech is delivered. By creating spaces for feedback and 'conversat

book' (2002: 619-620; cf. Fierke 1998). Billig (1987, 10-16) has suggested that such metaphors are partial, however: attention to the performance of scripts and the regularities of scripted public sloganeering captures only one aspect of theatre, the moment when backstage argument between producers, writers and actors over the content and choice of script is suspended. It also avoids addressing audience interpretation of the script, and whether the intended meaning was achieved. Analytical attention must be given to the formation and reception of a narrative, not just the moment of projection.

Laura Roselle's (2006) work exemplifies the analysis of how great powers form and project narratives and how they are received and interpreted by audiences. She documents how the US and USSR explained their respective military defeats in Vietnam and Afghanistan to their domestic publics and to international audiences. Each began with the claim that order had been disrupted and needed to be restored, for the sake of national interest and the good of the international system. Each then continually offered a narrative of progress, fortitude and inevitable victory, as fighting went on for over a decade in each case. Finally, as victory seemed impossible, each sought to narrate a form of resolution acceptable both to domestic public opinion and to signify strength and honour to external actors. Roselle's analysis highlights how political leaders attempted to use their domestic media systems to project their narrative, and how elite dissent was managed.

Lawrence Freedman writes, '[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events' (2006: 22). That is, if others are convinced that that narrative "fits" ongoing historical developments or understand those developments in terms of that narrative, then their responses become predictable. This cognitive dimension of narratives (understandings of cause/effect and means/ends) can work in parallel with a normative dimension. That is, interests and values can be co-constituted. Narratives can be used strategically to create or cohere identity groups and establish shared normative orientations (Ronfeld and Arquilla, 2001). For example, once individuals are convinced by a cause/effect narrative of climate change – that carbon emissions play a causal role and must therefore be limited – an identity group forms between those convinced by this, and they will distinguish themselves from 'deniers' in 'the other camp'.

Following this analysis about the strategic use of narratives in international relations and considering the changing nature of the international system and the impact of the new media ecology that we analyse below, we suggest the development of a new research agenda in the study of great power politics based on the concept of strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political elites attempt to give determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives. Examples include the justification of policy objectives or policy responses to economic or security crises, the formation of international alliances, or the rallying of domestic public opinion.

Hence our conception of strategic narrative reflects Hajer's definition of storylines in politics: 'the key function of storylines is that they suggest unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive component parts of a [policy] problem … The underlying assumption is that people do not draw upon comprehensive discursive systems for their cognition, rather these are *evoked through* storylines' (1995: 56, italics added). That storylines are used to evoke certain cognition points to the strategic usefulness of narratives. They are *strategic* insofar as they suggest medium- and long-term goals or desirable end-states and how to get there, based on representations of the situation, the key actors, and 'causal beliefs' about how social and political processes operate and thus how certain actions could be expected to play out (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 3). They also involve political struggles over 'whose story wins' (Nye, in Gardels and Medavoy, 2009: viii).

Critically, then, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals – they articulate end-states and suggest how to get there. The self-understandings expressed through strategic sA.pted aTed throub118.atildiidaky wHarn6(vhin Garaution, the)Tj0.1303 Tc .085684 Tw 8.ly weds

any choice requires justification. Since other actors in the system will be performing

ii. How: Emergence and diffusion rather than discrete messages

It follows that it is difficult, ontologically speaking, to demarcate discrete 'messages', 'senders' and 'receivers'. A political address is not simply transmitted and is never final: the communications of corporations, politicians, and even celebrities are packaged by pre-press releases, pre- and post-hoc commentary, and picked up and re-packaged, mashed-up and subverted by blogs. As mentioned earlier, President Obama's speech in Egypt in June 2009 was trailed for weeks beforehand, including interviews in which Obama previewed his message, and then digested for weeks afterwards, during which several core interpretations sedimented. Identifying a moment at which an audience receives any address has become a methodological headache. The notion of a definitive statement is undermined by these filters and feedback loops which alter the linear temporality of communication.

Narrative may appear to imply a linear conception of time, a sequence of events and actors determining what happens next, but in international affairs this need not be immediately obvious. The meaning of the Cold War as Western 'victory' was not apparent until it happened: the collapse of the Soviet Union could be interpreted as signifying its defeat and by implication the triumph of liberal democracy, allowing for a coherent meaning to be imposed retrospectively (Fierke and Weiner, 1999: 729) [3]. The new media ecology, however, radically increases the potential for re-evaluation, disruption and re-inscription of historical events and timelines. Take wars: once, the

language and framework through which key policy groups can come to agreement in the construction of a policy program'. Such coordinative discourses differ in strategic purpose from what she calls 'communicative discourse', a tool to persuade publics of the necessity of policies developed at the coordinative stage. There is scope in IR for institutional or even ethnographic study of these practices in different government departments and policy communities as well as the media organisations without which strategic narratives could not be projected. Schmidt attempts to

The struggle for power: war and identity

Few analysts dispute the fact that there seems to be new dynamics and shifts in the organisation, distribution and operation of power in world politics, along the lines we discussed in our introduction. Similarly few analysts dispute that these dynamics point to a new period of great power politics where emerging and currently dominant powers will (re)negotiate the nature and organising principles of the *international*. Yet there seems to be no agreement among IR scholars on the nature of this new era of great power politics. On the one hand, there are those theories that assume that whenever there has been a redistribution of power in the international system that challenges the dominant position of the each time existing hegemon, conflict and war have been unavoidable. Most analysts writing within the confines of such an understanding of world politics are inspired by texts that appeared in the second half of the 20th century that used variants of the concept of hegemonic war in their attempt to develop theories for analysing historical change and continuity. These include A.F.K. Organski's model of 'power transition' and George Modelski's work on 'long cycles' and 'global wars'. The work of historian Paul Kennedy on the rise and fall of great powers could also be included here. Yet, the most influential and most frequently used source on the theory of hegemonic war is the work of Robert Gilpin, and especially his book *War and Change in World Politics*.

According to Gilpin the theory of hegemonic war founds its origins in Thucydides' analysis of the Peloponnesian War, where, for the first time, the uneven growth of power among states is taken to be the main driving force in the evolution of international relations. Gilpin distinguishes between five stages in Thucydides analysis of hegemonic war. Firstly, there is a relatively stable international system characterised by a rather stable hierarchy of states. Over time, however, the power of a subordinate state begins to grow disproportionately, and this leads to a collision between this rising state and the dominant state of that system. Thirdly, this struggle between the dominant and the challenging state for pre-eminence leads to the formation of system-wide alliances and thus to the bipolarisation of the international system. As a result, the international system becomes increasingly unstable. A new equilibrium will be restored when this disjuncture between the old structure of the system and the new redistribution of power within the system will be resolved. In history, in most cases, this new order is the outcome of a hegemonic war, i.e. the struggle between the hegemon and its challengers.

This rationale is put forward for instance by John Mearsheimer in his seminal Neoclassical Realist statement *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. There, Mearsheimer concludes that a wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state, and therefore the US should do what it can to deter the rise of China. Even if it does not do so, it will be forced to do it by the structural imperatives of the international system. Along similar lines, Power Transition theory, developed by Organski, focuses on quantifying power resources to ascertain tipping points in history when dominant states are challenged by rapidly developing powers (Organski and Kugler, 1980, 1989; Dicicco

and Levy, 1999; Chan, 2005; see also Kupchan et al., 2001; Chan, 2005, 2007; Lemke, 1997; Kim, 1992). Doran, Houweling and Siccama stress the importance of 'critical points' in power transitions when opportunities for

between the dominant state and potential challengers are characterised not by black and white assertions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, but as a mixture of the two.

European ideas, it could be argued that the EU's strategic narrative is less driven by the force of ideas (neither social and economic liberalism nor human rights are particularly European notions) but a particular way of achieving them. Thus the EU shapes the international system through regulation setting, for instance US car manufacturers must comply with EU carbon emissions regulations to sell in the EU market, such that it becomes rational for those manufacturers simply to make all their cars to meet those standards.

Reflecting this, empirical analysis of what Hurrell calls *social power* has been undertaken in IR and political science. Through the diffusion and institutionalisation of policy ideas, emerging and great powers have sought to reframe international relations and the structure and character of the international system in order to achieve their interests. A number of methods have been used to trace and document these processes. Qualitative studies have focused on the role of ideational entrepreneurs who actively and strategically "push" ideas into policy communities and public debate (Berman, 1998; Finnemore, 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), the formation of epistemic communities that sustain and legitimise policy ideas (Haas, 1992), policy transfer between nation-states (Brueckner, 2003; Geddes and Guiraudon, 2004), and the importance of local context for the acceptance, negotiation or rejection of policy ideas (Acharya, 2004). Many studies of the international "flow of ideas" emphasise that the adoption of policy ideas may be less the outcome of a great power's grand strategy than by mundane emulation of apparently-legitimate practices, 'institutional isomor

Any detailed reference to the English School or Constructivism is beyond the scope and purposes of this article. Our point here is the following. There is a reading of the changing international system that runs counter to the assumptions and predictions of the hegemonic wars and balance of power approach. To this reading, the current emerging powers do not seem to present a direct challenge to the US predominant position in world politics, neither to lead to a period of hegemonic antagonisms and wars (see Gilpin, 1981; Organski and Kugler, 1980). That is, the emerging great powers do not seem to act as traditional challengers in a race for global dominance/hegemony (Gilpin, 1981). In contrast, what seems to be at issue is *recognition* rather than *domination* or *redistribution*[5]. Put differently, the aim of the emerging powers seems to be to 'register' their status as great powers in world politics, rather than to implement their own global hegemony. Their aim therefore is not to take over the place of the existing sole superpower. But rather to change the context in which this superpower operates. Their aim is to delineate an *identity space* (both domestically and externally) that, having been challenged by, aims to challenge the monopoly of the 'justifiable use of identity' that the US enjoyed after the end of the Cold War, and severely abused during the long 'Bush years'[6].

Such an approach then seems to point to a different balance that exists in world politics, a balance of identity. This notion of a balance of identity does not come to replace, but to complement the notion of a balance of power in world politics. Yet a balance of identity approach brings to the fore very different things in comparison to the traditional balance of power approach. The focus of the balance of identity is not on states' balancing behaviour that is animated by shifts in (material) capabilities. Rather its focus is on how emerging powers try to resolve domestic conflicts and/or participate in the making of world politics by articulating and projecting narratives that are based on identity claims about themselves and their place and stance in world politics. A balance of identity approach does not rule out the possibility of conflict or war. Different understandings of legitimate statehood and the norms of international order exist between for instance the US, EU, Russia, China and India. Thus, in a period in which power, norms and memberships are contested and in transition, tensions will unavoidably arise. A lack of shared understanding of what constitutes and should constitute acceptable rules and behaviour could lead to competing and conflicting interpretations and strategies (Clark, 2005; Hurrell, 2007) that may lead to conflict and war.

Following this assumption we urge for a careful focus on and analysis of the strategic narratives used by dominant and emerging powers, as well as the socio-communication environment that influences th

understandings and projections of identity and related strategic interests and goals and their (potential) implications in the domestic and international realms. Analysing the socio-communication environment will allow us to see how a new media ecology effects, influences and possibly alters this 'content/message' itself and the way it operates.

Conclusion and future directions

This article has set out a research agenda for the study of strategic narratives of great powers in order to account for the transition process towards new forms of international order that the current dynamics point to. We suggest that great powers attempt to determine that by using strategic narratives to project their interests and identities. It is through the interactions that follow as other emerging and great powers engage with these projections that a violent struggle for hegemony can be avoided, enabling actors to reduce uncertainty, adapt their narratives and policies in response to both others' narrative work and to unexpected events, and achieve domestic legitimacy. Theories of hegemonic rivalry and wars focused on material factors overlook the importance of these processes and the significance of what we have called the 'balance of identity'. IR studies that do account for the latter either fail to study the actual communicative mechanisms through which identity, status and interests are negotiated, downplay the agential/strategic aspects of power transitions, or privilege explanations of identity and interests rather than what happens when those identities and interests are 'put into play'. Meanwhile, IR as a whole has yet to take into account in any sustained manner the medium or arena in which much of this 'battle of ideas' will be waged, the new media ecology, which renders the political communication of strategic narratives more complex and possibly more difficult. Who gets to speak, how communication occurs, and the effects thereby generated, become more diffuse and unpredictable, albeit also offering new opportunities for states to harness citizen and media voices and spaces to project, defend, and even refine its strategic narrative.

In this conclusion we wish to point to some unresolved analytical issue. First, it is possible to distinguish instances when a narrative becomes detached from its original narrator. Ikenberry notes that liberalism has 'taken on a life of its own' beyond its original US progenitors, such that as countries in East As

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