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Syria and the Hegemon's Dilemma: Ontological Insecurity vs. Imperial Overstretch

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON, SEP 10 2013

Despite U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to attack Syria, the events of the past couple of weeks demonstrate, if nothing else, that almost no one wants to see the United States (U.S.) attack Syria over its alleged use of chemical weapons in its ongoing civil war. A CNN poll released yesterday shows that 55% of Americans would oppose a U.S.-led air-strike if Congress approves President Obama's call to action, and 71% would oppose strikes if Congress fails to approve military action in Syria. Major General Robert H. Scales (Ret., Army) opposes war in Syria, and believes the Pentagon does, too. Indeed, General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has never openly opposed military intervention in Syria, but when asked, he has consistently highlighted the risks of U.S. operations there.

Add to the list, the British Parliament, the UN Security Council, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, and the G20. Consensus for action does not exist among members of NATO. And even Pope Francis is calling for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.

Yet, President Obama and his administration are pressing forward in the effort to persuade the American public, the U.S. Congress, and the international community that action in Syria is in fact necessary. Much has been said on this subject, and now that Russia and the U.S. may have orchestrated a diplomatic alternative that would give Syria the opportunity to turn over its chemical weapon stockpiles to the oversight of the international community (thus giving Syria and the president a way out of this crisis), no doubt more is to come. As such, I don't want to focus on whether or not the U.S. should pursue these strikes, whether or not Bashar al-Assad is responsible for using chemical weapons on his own people, what the response to this crime should be, or how this crisis will affect the Obama presidency.

Instead, I want to focus on something U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in his 30 August 2013 appeal for action, and how this relates to International Relations (IR) theory.

Syria and U.S. Ontological Security

In a speech last Friday, John Kerry sympathized with Americans and people around the world when he said that the administration understands "that after a decade of conflict, [...] people are tired of war." But the legacy of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan notwithstanding, Kerry argued that

fatigue does not absolve us of our responsibility. Just longing for peace does not necessarily bring it about.

And history would judge us all extraordinarily harshly if we turned a blind eye to a dictator's wanton use of weapons of mass destruction against all warnings, against all common understanding of decency. These things, we do know.

While many may not understand the U.S.'s national security interests in Syria, Kerry is clearly concerned about the nation's ontological security—it's security of self (and self-conception). According to Brent J. Steele, as states seek "to maintain *consistent self-concepts*" which "[give] life to routinized foreign policy actions," narratives and images

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that disrupt a state's sense of self thus result in ontological insecurity. The events of Rwanda challenged the notion that the U.S. is the ultimate defender of human rights and liberty, rendering it, says Steele, a "haunted hegemon." Steele argues further that the decision to label Rwanda a "never-again moment" ultimately stirred the U.S. to action in Kosovo.

Now, U.S. ontological security may be at stake again. Steele (see [here](#) and [here](#)) terms images and language meant to illicit a state's feelings of insecurity as "reflexive imaging," and "reflexive discourse," respectively. They are strategies designed to stimulate self-interrogation, which explains why Kerry reminds his listeners of the children who have died in Syria's chemical weapon attacks, and why images (and videos) of victims have been plastered throughout the media.

Defending the international norms against the use of chemical weapons therefore, is tied to the same ideational forces in American identity that have encouraged the U.S. to stand firmly (or at least rhetorically) against genocide, war crimes, and other crimes against humanity.

In *Ontological Security in International Relations*, Steele argues that hegemonic units, like the United States are especially susceptible to the problem of shame—the emotional source of ontological insecurity—"because they possess the greatest capabilities" and are thus "confronted with a greater set of choices for action in any situation" (14). A state's material resources and capabilities are factors in the decision to act in situations where ontological security trumps physical security. This gets at what hegemonic stability theorists refer to as ability. Thus, if Steele is correct, a state with the ability to act, must act if it wants to avoid shame and ontological insecurity.

From the perspective of ontological security theory then, Secretary Kerry is right, even in the face of "war fatigue" the U.S. cannot tolerate inaction in Syria, nor can it allow Syria's continued use of chemical weapons. Enter the hegemon's dilemma.

The Hegemon's Dilemma: Imperial Overstretch

War fatigue may not be an excuse for inaction in Syria, but what about imperial overstretch? Secretary Kerry seems like he's forgotten the same lesson of hegemonic stability theory (HST) that neoconservatives^[1] missed in the run up to wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, that a hegemon too eager to overextend its military resources will ultimately precipitate its own decline. This is, as historian Paul Kennedy has termed, the problem of "imperial overstretch."

A hegemon thus has the responsibility to avoid unnecessary forays into international conflict, for doing so will be a drain on its abilities, and ultimately diminish its ability to intervene in future conflict situations that have a real bearing on international stability. This is a source of hegemonic decline, which, according to HST, can lead to larger, global wars.

Of course, I am not saying that U.S. action in Syria will lead to World War III as some in social media have naively (and hyperbolically) suggested. What I am suggesting though is that after two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, after a campaign in Libya, after a pivot to the Pacific which involves hedging the U.S. military and its allies against the People's Republic of China, and given the continuation of the global war on terror in Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere, attacking Syria could be a real drain on U.S. military resources that could ultimately undermine the U.S.'s ability to maintain international stability in the future.

Some, like my colleague Robert Murray, assume that President Obama has intentionally eroded U.S. hegemony. I disagree with such declinist notions, but the U.S. has nevertheless been at war for almost the entirety of the 21st century, and both the public and military are tired of conflict. Even if Secretary of State John Kerry is right, and this war fatigue is not an excuse for inaction in Syria, the implications of imperial overstretch very well may be. Especially given the widespread international opposition to military strikes in Syria mentioned above, this is a question to which U.S. policymakers and IR theorists must give serious consideration both before and after the U.S. makes its ultimate decision, for it will ultimately bear on the discussion of U.S. hegemonic decline for years to come.

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[1] For the neoconservative misunderstanding of imperial overstretch in hegemonic stability, see William Kristol and William Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 1996). The full text of the article is available from the Carnegie Endowment at <http://carnegieendowment.org/1996/07/01/toward-neo-reaganite-foreign-policy/1sns>.

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