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Final Write Up - LSE Phelan Centre UGRA

Throughout the 2024/25 academic year, I have had the privilege of working alongside Dr. Jonny Hall on a project studying how United States (U.S.) presidents justified the withdrawal of American troops from wars. The central puzzle that this research seeks to explain is how the military withdrawal - commonly perceived with defeat and losing - is understood alongside an autobiographical image of the U.S. as being forever victorious. While the project is new, it builds on previous research by Dr Hall on the theory of 'ontological security', particularly in the U.S. context where winning is perceived to be central to its identity.

My Work

My focus was on the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the freshness of the project, my job was to provide a sample of primary and secondary sources for Dr Hall to take a closer look at in order to uncover broader similar/different ontological dynamics across war-ending presidential acts.

First, I established a brief two to three page timeline for the wars. This step entailed a heavy consumption of various secondary material, such as books, given my rudimentary understanding of both conflicts initially. Nevertheless, it helped me lay a strong foundation of understanding which would prove useful later on in the project.

Second, tapping on the timeline, I identified key presidential speeches regarding the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The key focus on this section was on how various Presidents sought to justify the withdrawal of troops. These speeches were accessed online via The American Presidency Project website. Important paragraphs were highlighted and annotated for Dr Hall to review.

Third, I turned to a broad range of secondary literature that sought to explain the withdrawal of U.S. forces. This process sought to examine if Dr Hall's argument centring on ontological (in)security had been utilised in previous academic explanations, and if any explanatory gaps existed. Overall, these readings confirmed Dr Hall's observation that while a large swath of International Relations literature touches on war ending, the majority of them are rationalist and had failed to sufficiently acknowledge identity-related factors.

Findings

Through analysing the speeches of American presidents in justifying the withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, we noticed certain common themes. Despite having to retreat from the two countries, policymakers typically sought to frame it as a success. This is in line with other works

on ontological security - such as by Dr Hall - that notes the importance of winning in the U.S. psyche. For instance, when explaining the Afghanistan withdrawal in August 2021, President Biden maintained the U.S. intervened in Afghanistan for certain narrower goals, and on that basis sought to assert U.S. Afghanistan involvement was a success. Likewise, remarking on the withdrawal from Iraq, Obama noted that the U.S. was 'moving forward from a position of strength', and that the 'tide of war is receding'.

Beyond claiming success, presidents tend to deflect responsibility, perhaps in recognition (correctly) of the huge political costs associated with being seen as weak. In the case of Afghanistan, President Biden heaped blame on President Trump, who had negotiated a deal with the Taliban prior to Biden's inauguration. Further, Biden lambasted Trump for overseeing the deterioration in security conditions.

In both wars, U.S. presidents sought to highlight the responsibility of local Iraqi and Afghanistan governments for maintaining the (dubious) successes of the U.S. and used this shield to justify withdrawals. In Iraq, President Obama noted that 'Iraq is a sovereign country with legitimate institutions; America cannot - and should not - take their place'; while in Afghanistan, President Biden directly condemned Afghanistan political leaders who 'gave up and fled the country'.

In short, while withdrawals are typically associated with defeats, U.S. presidents have been careful to avoid bolstering such linkages. This then somewhat validates the usage of ontological security in explaining withdrawals - that such policies are deeply anathema not only because of rationalist cost-benefit analysis, but because it goes against the idea of who we (U.S.) are and stand for.

Implications

The study is especially important today, as wars have become more common in the geopolitical landscape. In conflicts such as Russia-Ukraine or those concerning Israel, countries are being drawn into military confrontation. This research has shown how difficult it is for policymakers, barring a clear-cut victory, to withdraw from war without involving career-ending political costs. It thus places ontological factors in the center of the war termination dilemma, showing that leaders are not just concerned with rationalist cost-benefit calculations, but also by considerations of honour and identity. Yet, paradoxically, in the words of President Obama, victory today 'will not look like the ones our father and grandfathers achieved. There will not be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship'. This enhanced difficulty of winning - and thus terminating - wars should give pause to policymakers (alongside a vast plethora of other reasons) to think thrice before entering conflicts.

Additionally, while this project has located plausible techniques for policymakers to terminate wars - such as asserting victory or deflecting blame - these techniques are not foolproof and indeed

not even likely to succeed. Indeed, in the case of Afghanistan, the botched withdrawal process in spite of Biden's claims of success had nevertheless been instrumental in ruining popular perceptions of his capability.

Reflections

Working with Dr Hall and the opportunities which have come from being an Undergraduate Research Assistant has been some of my most exciting experiences in LSE. The project has provided me with a valuable platform to systemically apply the theoretical knowledge gleaned from my International Relations degree to real world problems. I am confident that the knowledge and skills gained from this project will be invaluable as I progress in my academic and professional career.