Rhetoric of civil conflict management: United Nations Security Council debates over the Syrian civil war

Juraj Medzihorsky[1], Milos Popovic[2] and Erin K. Jenne[1]

Abstract

This paper introduces a spatial model of civil conflict management rhetoric to explore how the emerging norm of responsibility to protect shapes major power rhetorical responses to civil war. Using framing theory, we argue that responsibility to protect functions like a prescriptive norm, such that representing a conflict as one of (1) human rights violations (problem definition), implies rhetorical support for (2) coercive outside intervention (solution identification). These dimensions reflect the problem-solution form of a prescriptive norm. Using dictionary scaling with a dynamic model, we analyze the positions of UN Security Council members in debates over the Syrian Civil War separately for each dimension. We find that the permanent members who emphasized human rights violations also used intervention rhetoric (UK, France, and the US), and those who did not used non-intervention rhetoric (Russia and China). We conclude that, while not a fully consolidated norm, responsibility to protect appears to have structured major power rhetorical responses to the Syrian Civil War.

Keywords

Conflict management, framing, responsibility to protect, Syrian Civil War, text scaling, UN Security Council

Introduction

Conflict management has been at the heart of multilateral debates since the advent of international organizations. After WWII, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was established as the chief forum in which states discuss and decide on its scope and forms. Although non-intervention largely held sway during the Cold War, discussions of humanitarian intervention intensified in the 1990s. In 2005, the UN established the political commitment known as responsibility to protect (R2P), which laid out the conditions under which the international community was required to intervene on behalf of beleaguered populations, sometimes through force. In what is seen as a key test of R2P, the permanent five members (P5) of the UNSC—China, France, Russia, the UK and the US—have disagreed profoundly over the handling of the Syrian civil war (Gifkins, 2012; Hehir, 2013, 2016).

Scholars disagree about the impact of R2P and similar norms on policies (Bellamy, 2008; Breau, 2006; Hehir, 2013). In this paper, we propose a model for how such a norm might function rhetorically based on framing theory (Burke, 1969; Entman, 2004; Garrison, 2001; Lakoff,

1999). If political actors successfully frame an event as a problem invoking a given norm, then certain policy solutions become thinkable, if not inevitable. We argue that this has implications for how states talk about civil conflict management. Namely, conflict management rhetoric can be mapped onto a two-dimensional space, where one dimension corresponds to problem definition (does the conflict involve human rights violations?), and the other to solution identification (is the preferred solution intervention?). Under R2P, a conflict involving large scale human rights violations such as ethnic cleansing or war crimes requires an urgent international response. Consequently, we can expect that state agents engaged in "human rights violations talk" are also likely to engage in

[1]Central European University, Hungary
[2]Columbia University, USA

Corresponding author:
Juraj Medzihorsky, Central European University, Nador u. 9, Budapest, H-1051, Hungary.
Email: juraj.medzihorsky@gmail.com

"intervention talk". To locate states in this space, we extend dictionary-based logistic scaling (Lowe et al., 2011) with a Bayesian dynamic model for noisy and biased observations.

We apply the model to the UNSC debates over how to respond to the Syrian civil war. Under the logic of R2P, states' rhetorical positions on the two dimensions should be related. To avoid assumptions about the dimensions' relationship, we conduct the text analysis separately for each dimension and then examine the relationship. With some exceptions, we see that there is a clear correlation between state positions on the two rhetorical dimensions. We also find that while states leaning toward intervention tended to acknowledge human rights violations, not all of those who acknowledged them advocated intervention. Focusing on the P5, we find that the US, the UK and France favored both "violations talk" and "intervention talk" in these debates, while Russia and China largely avoided both. Beginning in 2014, Russia and China increasingly began speaking of violations, although perpetrated by ISIS rather than the government. Russia's uptick in "intervention talk" corresponded with its 2015 military deployment. In contrast, China has consistently favored non-military solutions to the conflict, despite its increased "violations talk." This break with the model's rhetorical expectations is unsurprising given China's ongoing resistance to the R2P norm.

Rhetorical space of international civil conflict management

Framing in international relations

Scholars have long observed that how political leaders talk about an event or issue greatly influences their audience's beliefs about the appropriate policies to follow. Framing is a form of rhetorical action used by policy-makers to persuade their audiences that an event or issue is a problem of a particular kind, prescribing a particular response (Entman, 2004; Lakoff, 1999). In doing so, they may employ salient historical metaphors or other tropes to inculcate in the audience a need for urgent policy response. The effect of this rhetoric is amplified by both the emotional resonance of the frame and its opacity. If successful, framing firmly attaches to the issue, closing or preempting debate and making the adoption of a certain set of policies that much more likely.

This problem-solution logic of such framing closely corresponds to that of prescriptive norms, which are explicit or implicit rules stating that a certain set of actions or non-actions should be taken in a given situation. Constructivist scholars have demonstrated the power of norms in guiding policy and actions at both the national and international level. They have traced, for example, the emergence and spread of norms regarding the use of certain weapons,

slavery and child labor (see Checkel, 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Price, 1998; Risse, 2000; Tannenwald, 1999). Their research shows that norms have a life-cycle, from emerging to consolidated (internalized). However, a norm need not be fully consolidated to be effective, so long as the costs of violating the norm are deemed sufficiently high (Krebs and Jackson, 2007). Even if political actors pay lip service to the norm for instrumental reasons, this can lead to "rhetorical coercion" or "rhetorical entrapment" (Schimmelfennig, 2000) by which the speaker is "trapped" or "coerced" into following the logic of the norm to avoid the audience costs of failing to do so. When preferences over policy conflict, policy-makers compete to achieve interpretive dominance over an issue. Most of the literature on foreign policy framing focuses on such contests on the domestic level. For example, Weldes and Saco (1996) describe interpretive struggles over "the Cuban problem" in the US Congress and the White House. Similarly, Paris (2002) captures how the pro- and anti-intervention advocates in the US government used different metaphors to frame the Kosovo conflict in 1999 to promote their preferred policies.

We extend this logic to the international level, arguing that the R2P norm has structured the rhetorical space in which different state agents contest the appropriate form of civil conflict management. Although R2P may not be fully consolidated in the sense of being internalized by all state actors, it performs a vital "regulative function" by requiring states opposed to intervention to engage in interpretive struggles over the nature of the conflict itself as a way of promoting their favored policy.

The UNSC is the appropriate forum in which to examine these struggles because, while it generally suffers from legitimacy deficit among UN member states (Binder and Heupel, 2015), it is the principal organ for shaping and coordinating responses to international and civil crises. Both permanent and non-permanent members perceive the Council as the appropriate venue in which to explain their policies (Thompson, 2006). Despite their more limited powers, non-permanent members use prior consultations and sessions to reach out to the P5 or wider audiences (Hurd, 2002). The UNSC also serves to authorize the use of force, in turn influencing state behavior in the international arena (Voeten, 2005). The language used at the UNSC has been analyzed from a similar perspective by Hehir (2016) and Gifkins (2016), who inspected the documents approved by the Council for R2P's influence.

Framing conflict management

Before proceeding to the analysis, some background on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm is in order. R2P holds that the international community has an obligation to protect vulnerable groups from extreme human rights violations such as war crimes, genocide, or politicide. Already

before R2P, some military interventions were justified on grounds of human and minority rights protection (Finnemore, 2004; Krasner, 1999). Humanitarian framing often accompanied calls for military intervention (Labonte, 2013) on the grounds that it is an emergency situation requiring prompt, forceful response (Bostdorff, 1994).

The R2P principle itself originates from a 2001 report by the International Commission on intervention and state sovereignty, which holds that when a sovereign state cannot or will not protect its citizens from mass atrocities, the international community has the responsibility to protect them, through force if necessary (Garwood-Gowers, 2016). In 2005, the UN General Assembly formally accepted the responsibility of the international community to protect civilians in case any of its member states failed to meet that responsibility. Many states objected strongly to R2P's "third pillar", which establishes a positive mandate to respond through force as a last resort. China and Russia in particular have argued that the Western P3 could use the doctrine to justify serial interventions driven by self interests, and that codifying R2P in international law will lead to more, rather than fewer, military interventions resulting in instability and loss of life (Goodman, 2006). In 2009, however, both the General Assembly and the P5 approved the doctrine, including its controversial third pillar.

Given the intensity of these debates over the principle itself, many doubted that R2P would have any impact on intervention practices. Following its adoption, the first major test of the principle was the Syrian civil war. The question was whether R2P would influence the positions of the major powers on the conflict, including major critics of the doctrine, following the logic of rhetorical entrapment. If an R2P norm is operative, we should see state agents follow its problem-solution logic in UNSC debates over the Syrian war.

We map the UNSC debates on Syria on a two-dimensional rhetorical space. The first dimension defines the problem posed by the conflict. If policy-makers succeed in framing conflict in terms of human rights violations, this implies that the state has failed in its responsibility to protect the population. Following R2P, those who acknowledge the violations should also be more likely to frame the solution in terms of intervention, which is captured on the second dimension.

Our spatial model has much in common with many other spatial models in the discipline (see e.g. Benoit and Laver, 2012; Laver, 2014). Most often, spatial models are used to characterize directly unobservable policy preferences of actors, and require assumptions that are difficult to test in some contexts, such as the characteristics of actors' utility functions (Krehbiel and Peskowitz, 2015). Our model does not aim to automatically capture the states' policy preferences, but rather the policy-relevant content of their rhetoric by characterizing the framing they deploy—mapping these debates using relatively light assumptions.

Analysis of UNSC debates on Syrian civil war

Data

In the period of analysis, 38 UNSC meetings focused on the Middle East. In addition to Syria, some also discussed other topics, chiefly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Thus, we have selected only meetings in which at least 3/4 of the speeches mentioned Syria and at most 1/4 of them Palestine. Table 1 reports the 23 selected meetings, including their main topic and, if applicable, voting outcome. We collected the meeting records in their official English translations.[1]

We concatenated the speeches by meeting and state, producing 380 documents. Presiding members were included only when speaking in their capacity as state representatives. Next, we excluded states who spoke at one meeting only, yielding a corpus of 347 speeches by 37 states, including 113 by P5 members.[2] The corpus was cleaned of numbers, punctuation and separators, set to lowercase and stemmed. Finally, the occurrences of the (stemmed) dictionary words were counted.

Dictionary

To place the speeches on the rhetorical space, we have developed a dictionary with four classes of words, each of which include theme words associated with either end of our two dimensions. We identify these words using the outlined theory as well as the authors' background knowledge of the debates on R2P (Table 2). Accordingly, human rights violations (HRVs) framing includes references to subjects of violence ("tyranny", "perpetrator"), different words for their objects ("women", "children", "civilians"), and descriptors associated with acts of one-sided violence, such as "crime", "repression", "torture", "atrocities", "massacre" or even "genocide". HRVs framing also contains calls to "humanity" and "moral" as a bulwark against perceived human rights violations. On the opposite end of the spectrum, non-HRVs framing tends to avoid blame-casting. Conflicts are portrayed as a struggle between two parties in which violence is mostly a byproduct of armed encounters; various terms are used to describe violence as two-sided and blameless. Theme words include "crisis", "struggle", "war", and "chaos". Warring actors are nameless "parties" whose "fighting" and "clashes" generate "losses" and "casualties" that "threat[en]" to undermine "stability" or "security".

Moving to the second dimension, "intervention" framing involves portraying the government as failing its basic task to protect its population—requiring immediate outside action ranging from humanitarian aid to military interference. The theme words associated with this frame include terms for third party intervention ("action", "arrest", "intervention", "stop") as well as modes of

Table 1. Included UNSC meetings.

No.	Date	Topic	Outcome
6524	27 April 2011	Violence vs. the protesters	
6572	30 June 2011	Extend UNDOF mandate	S/RES/1994 adopted
6627	4 October 2011	Condemn Syrian government	China & Russia veto draft resolution
6710	31 January 2012	Arab League report on Syria	
6711	4 February 2012	Siege of Homs	China & Russia veto draft resolution
6734	12 March 2012	Arab Spring	
6751	14 April 2012	Annan's 6-point proposal	S/RES/2042 adopted
6756	21 April 2012	UN Syria supervision mission	S/RES/2043 adopted
6810	19 July 2012	Economic sanctions vs. Syria	China & Russia veto draft resolution
6826	30 August 2012	Syrian refugees	
7038	27 September 2013	Destruction of Syrian chemical weapons	S/RES/2118 adopted
7096	20 January 2014	Geneva talks	
7116	22 February 2014	Humanitarian situation	S/RES/2139 adopted
7180	22 May 2014	ICC mandate over Syria crimes	China & Russia veto draft resolution
7216	14 July 2014	Humanitarian aid/ISIS	S/RES/2165 adopted
7394	26 February 2015	Syria humanitarian situation/ISIS	
7401	6 March 2015	Report on Syria chemical weapons	S/RES/2209 adopted
7419	27 March 2015	ISIS	
7433	24 April 2015	Humanitarian aid for Yarmouk, Aleppo & Homs	
7501	7 August 2015	Chemical weapons responsibility	S/RES/2235 adopted
7560	16 November 2015	Syrian refugees/ISIS	
7588	18 December 2015	Geneva talks/ISIS	
7595	22 December 2015	Humanitarian aid/ISIS	S/RES/2258 adopted

Table 2. The dictionary.

Theme	Words
No HRVs	conflict, violence, tension, struggle, war, stability, destabilize, security, crisis, escalate, incite, threat, chaos, cycle, fighting, casualties, losses, parties, clash, dispute
HRVs	repression, humanity, crime, moral, torture, persecution, abuse, oppress, repress, life, incite, tyranny, terrorism, children, women, perpetrator, victims, accountable, massacre, crackdown, targeting, indiscriminate, brutal, barrel, genocide, cleansing, school, hospital, kill
Non-intervention	process, charter, implementation, dialogue, constructive, consensus, diplomatic, reconciliation, settlement, comprehensive, inclusive, mediation, effort, negotiation, proposal, solution
Pro-intervention	urgent, action, assistance, support, aid, sanctions, arrest, stop, intervention, end, deliver

helping victimized groups ("assistance", "aid", "support", "deliver"). By contrast, "non-interventionist" framing calls for consensual engagement with the government, using tools of diplomacy. Mitigating violence is seen as a "process" or "effort" in which the international community engages the target government through "dialogue", "negotiations" and other "diplomatic" means in accordance with the UN "charter". The aim is to bring about "solution" or "settlement", preferably "inclusive" and "comprehensive", between the warring sides.

Having checked the dictionary against terms used in the original debates over the R2P principle, we believe the dictionary captures general features of R2P rhetoric that travel across conflicts. It also includes theme words specific to the Syrian civil war. This means that it can be adapted to other conflicts through partial replacement of the words. Table 1

in Online Appendix 1 illustrates how the dictionary words appeared in the context of the debates.

Statistical model

To measure relative emphasis in the speeches, we adapt logistic scaling (Lowe, 2016; Lowe et al., 2011), under which the document score is a logistic function of the document-level counts of words attached to the positive and the negative side of the dimension. "Positive" and "negative" are used in their mathematical sense and do not automatically convey any normative or sentimental information. We assigned the positive ends to human rights violations and pro-intervention talk, respectively.

In building the statistical model, we take into account three factors. First, there is a degree of continuity in the

framing used by a state, and its rhetorical position at a meeting depends on its position at the previous meeting where its representative spoke. Second, word usage is affected by meeting themes related to current events. The fact that some word frequencies vary across meetings reflects not only the change in states' positions, but also meeting topics. Third, the observations contain some stochastic noise. In short, the observed word counts are a function of random noise, bias and rhetorical positions dependent on previous positions.

To account for these factors, we adopt a Bayesian dynamic model related to models used to extract ideal points of US Supreme Court judges (Martin and Quinn, 2002), party policy positions (König et al., 2013) and state preferences in the UN General Assembly (Bailey et al., 2017). Specifically, we model the count of "positive" words W^+ in the speech of i th state at t th meeting

$$W_{it}^+ \sim Binomial(p_{it}, N_{it})$$

as a Binomial draw governed by rate p_{it} with N_{it} trials equal the the sum of "positive" and "negative" words in the speech. The rate is a function of the speech position θ_{it} and meeting coefficient ("effect")

$$p_{it} = \text{logit}^{-1}(\gamma_t + \theta_{it})$$

where γ_t is the coefficient of the t th meeting. The meeting coefficients are random, drawn from a Normal distribution with a mean of zero and a standard deviation σ_γ, with a regularizing half-Normal hyper-prior

$$\gamma_t \sim Normal(0, \sigma_\gamma)$$
$$\sigma_\gamma \sim Normal^+(0,1)$$

Finally, the state's positions are modeled as a random walk with the first position having a unit Normal prior and subsequent positions as drawn from Cauchy distributions with state-specific standard deviations with regularizing half-Normal priors

$$\theta_{i1} \sim Normal(0,1)$$
$$\theta_{it} \sim Cauchy(\theta_{it=x}, o_{it}\sigma_i), t \geq 2, x < t$$
$$\sigma_i \sim Normal^+(0,\tau)$$
$$\tau \sim Normal^+(0,1)$$

where $t = x$ is the closest previous meeting at which the i th state spoke, and o_{it} is the square root of the distance in days between these two meetings. The standard deviation σ_i captures the variability of i th state's positions in time. The Cauchy distribution is used for the "steps" instead of the Normal as its thicker tails are more permissive of occasional relatively large steps, such as policy changes stemming from government change.

The model was fit separately for the two dimensions using the no U-turns sampler (Hoffman and Gelman, 2014) as implemented in the stan modeling language available in the rstan package (Carpenter et al., 2016; Stan Development Team, 2016a,b) for the R language (R Core Team, 2016). Each model was fit running eight separate chains, each for 2,000,000 warm-up and 2,000,000 sampling iterations. To ensure low chain auto-correlation, each 8000th sampling iteration was saved, yielding 250 draws per chain and thus 2000 overall. Convergence was assessed using the Gelman-Rubin $\hat{R}$ diagnostic (Gelman and Rubin, 1992).

Findings

The average positions of the 37 analyzed states, shown in Figure 1, are positively correlated, with Pearson ρ of 0.40 (two-sided 95% interval of [0.16,0.57]). At 17 of the 23 meetings the correlation was clear ($\bar{\rho} \approx 0.5 \pm 0.25$), and at the remaining six mostly positive (Figure A3 in the Online Appendix). The HRVs-intervention corner is occupied by the P3, plus Israel, Germany, Luxembourg, Turkey and Australia. China and Russia occupy the opposite, no-HRVs/no-intervention corner. Notably, its occupants include Brazil, India and South Africa, and several African, South American and Asian states. In support of our expectation that R2P norm is regulating civil conflict rhetoric, most states are located either on the main diagonal that runs from P3 to Russia and China, or below it. In other words, those who favor intervention cast the conflict in terms of human rights violations, but not all those who acknowledge human rights violations, join them in advocating intervention.

It should be acknowledged that most states are located between the two clusters. They include countries geographically remote from Syria (e.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Guatemala, Rwanda, South Korea) or traditionally taking middle ground at UN and other fora (e.g. Argentina, Portugal, Spain). Perhaps less intuitive is the presence of Lebanon and Syria. One might expect the Syrian regime to frame the conflict in terms of "no human rights violations" and "non-intervention", in line with their preference to avoid military intervention. However, Syria has largely avoided talking about the civil war, and focused instead on the behavior of regional actors, including accusations against Israel, Gulf states and even Turkey for their actions against the regime. On the other hand, Lebanon is in a precarious situation because it suffers from conflict spill-over, and a strong domestic actor, Hezbollah, participates in the conflict. Its representatives have devoted much space to addressing the domestic situation in Lebanon.

Typical mobility on both dimensions is shown by state in Figure 2. In general, the 37 states maintained stable positions on the "solution" dimension, but less so on the "problem" one. There, remarkably, China and France were among the most mobile. This is better seen in Figure 3, which shows the trajectories of the P5.[3] China originally
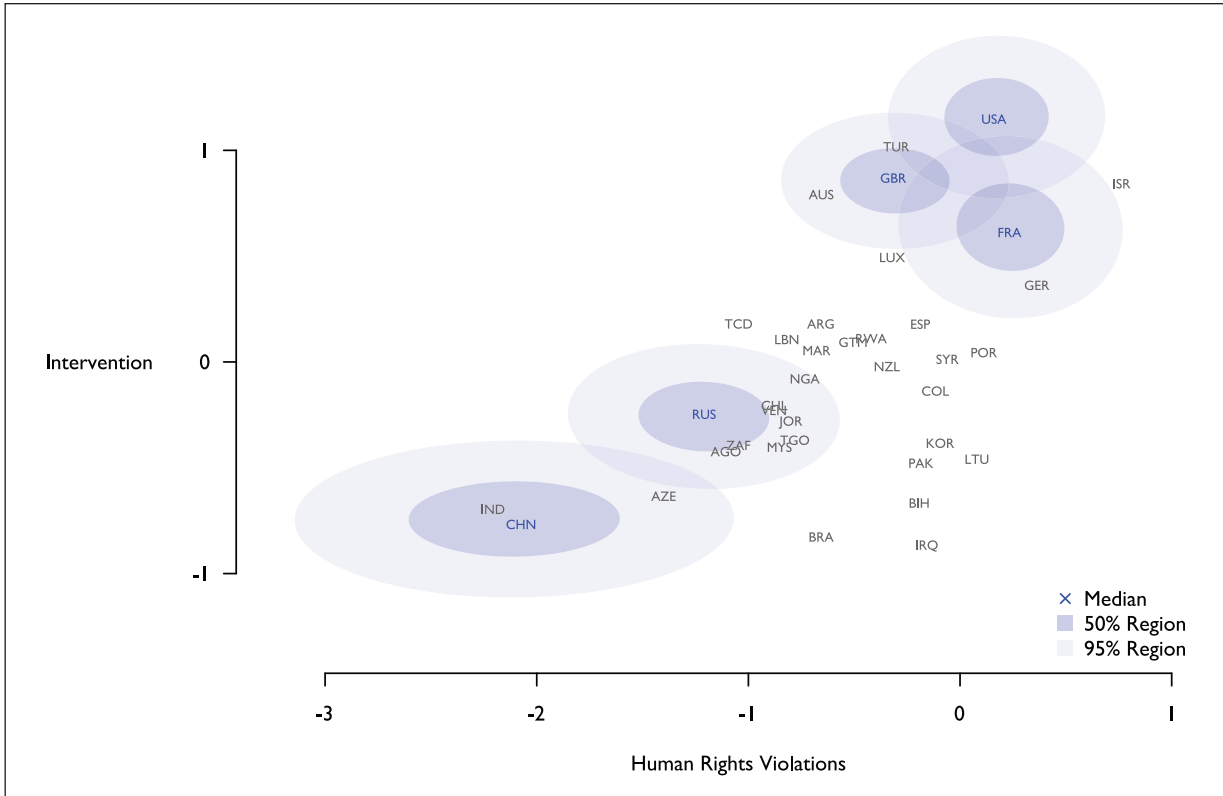
Figure 1. Average state positions in the debates. Medians; P5 members with 50% and 95% ellipses. Intervals for all 37 states shown in Figure A2.
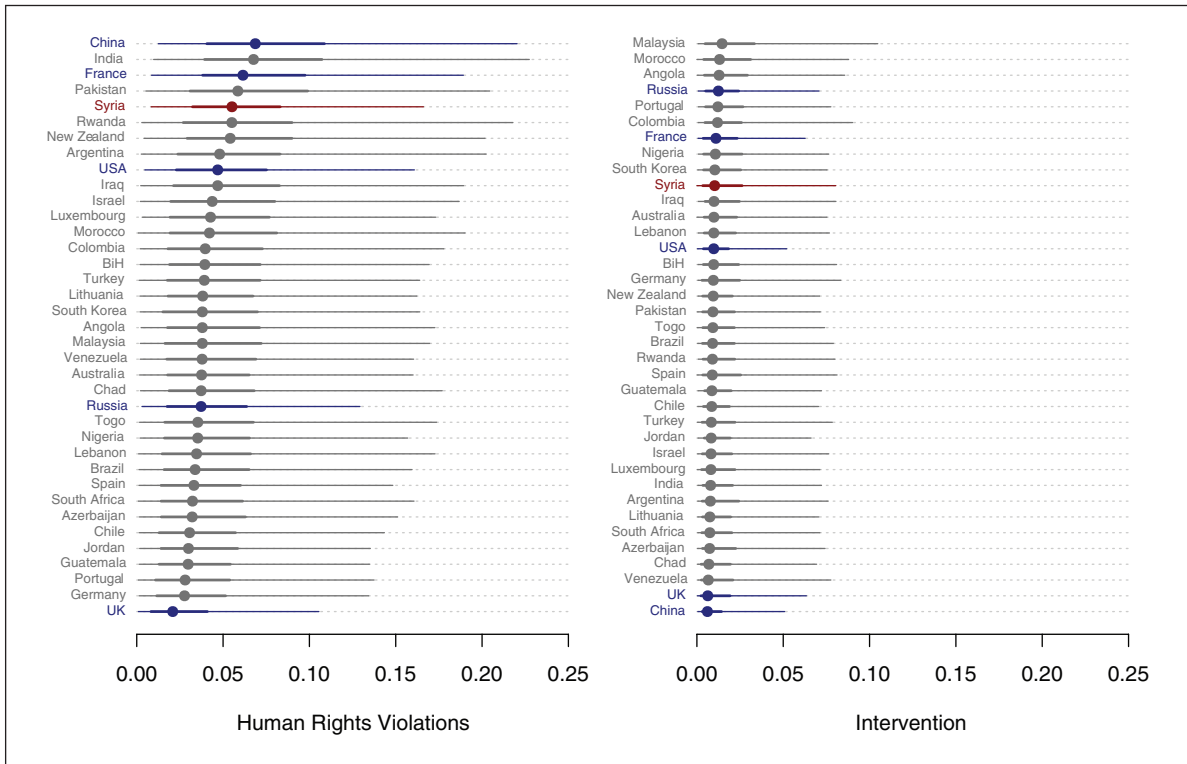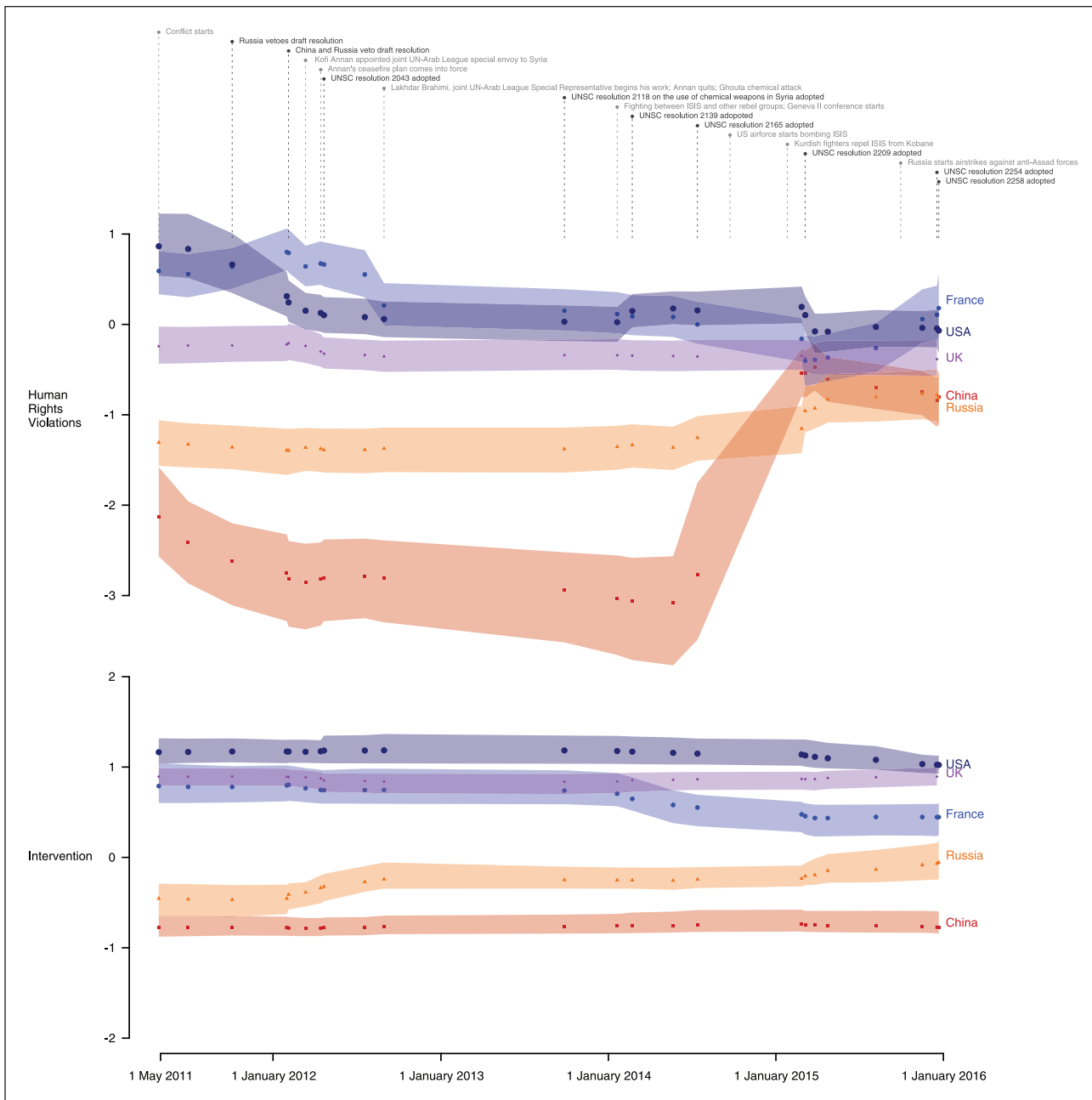

Figure 2. Typical daily steps on the two rhetorical dimensions. Medians with 50% and 95% intervals.

Figure 3. P5 positions on the two rhetorical dimensions. Medians with 50% intervals. 95% intervals shown in Figures A4 and A5.

framed the conflict as a complex struggle (no human rights violations). However, as ISIS grew in strength, China began to utilize more "violations talk", thus converging somewhat with the P3. Russia converged with the P3 in the same way, but from a much smaller distance. Notably, Russia moved toward more HRV talk (where the perpetrators are ISIS and Syrian rebels rather than the regime) as well as more intervention talk, and both shifts came prior to the Russian 2015 intervention. Nonetheless, despite the P5 converging on the problem identification, the states remain divided on the solution, which maps onto the P5 divide over the third

pillar of the R2P doctrine. The meeting coefficients, displayed in Figure 4, show that, in addition to the changes in framing adopted by the participants after 2014, the prevalence of words associated with human rights violations and intervention increased relative to words associated with the other ends of the two-dimensions.

Conclusion

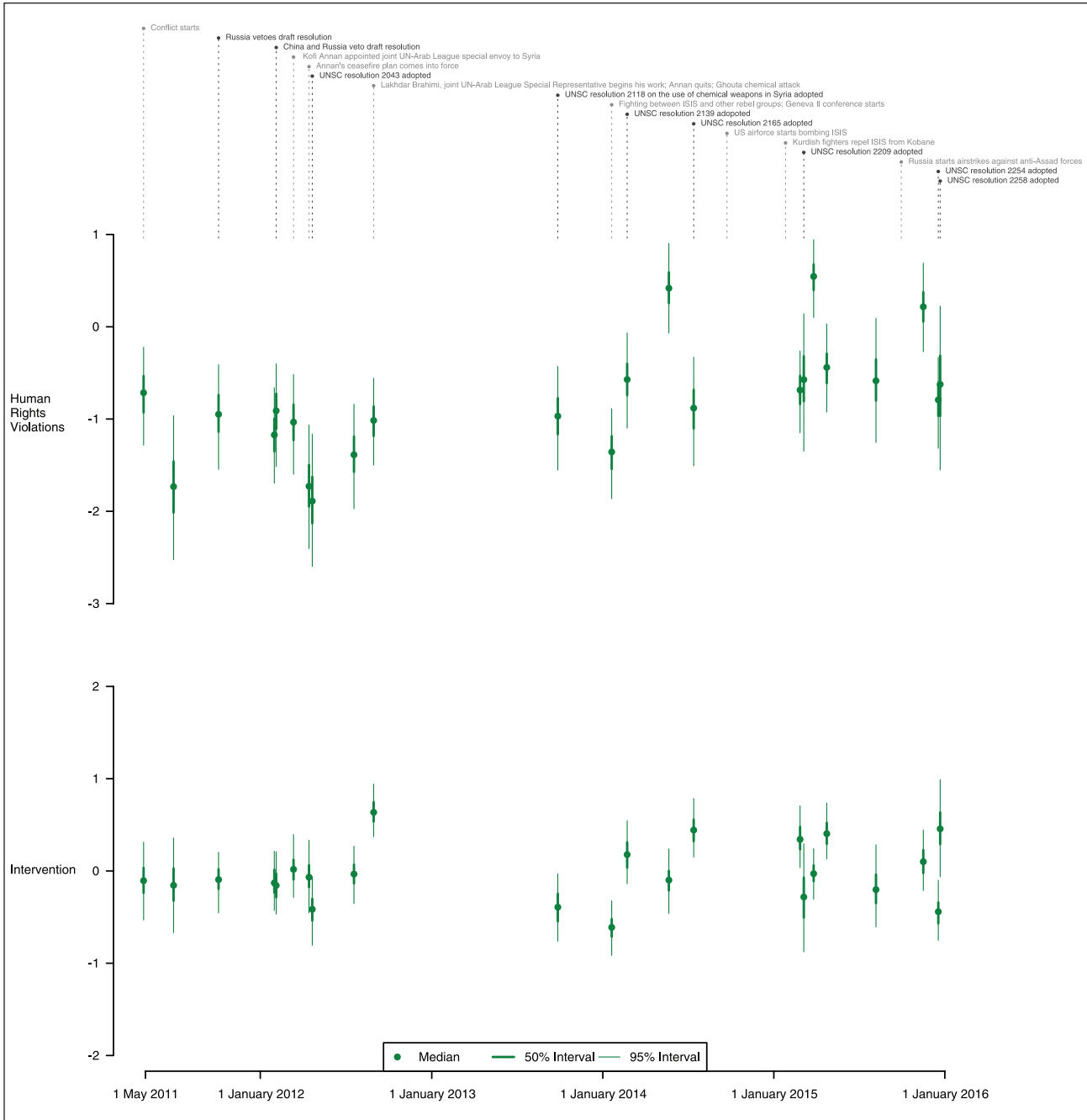This paper introduced a model of civil conflict management rhetoric and applied it to UNSC debates over

Figure 4. Meeting coefficients. Medians with 50% and 95% intervals.

international responses to the Syrian civil war. Building on framing theory, the model is intended to show the ways in which the emerging R2P norm regulates civil conflict management rhetoric on two dimensions—problem definition and solution identification. Problems vary from conflicts involving HRVs, typically war crimes, and conflicts that are complex and largely blameless. Solutions range from coercive intervention to more cooperative engagement.

We use quantitative text analysis to place the debating UNSC Member States on both dimensions. In line with our expectations of the regulatory effects of the R2P norm, most states fall on the diagonal. While the three Western permanent members have been more inclined to frame the conflict in terms of human rights violations and to call for outside intervention, Russia and even more so China framed it more as a complex struggle amenable to non-interventionist solutions. Eventually, in parallel with the ascent of ISIS, China and Russia moved closer to the P3 by framing the conflict in terms of human rights violations, but, except for minor movements by Russia, largely adhered

to non-interventionist framing. This is consistent with the observation that P5's disagreement, at least in international fora, goes beyond the conflict in question, and extends to the norms of global conflict management themselves. To the extent that R2P regulates civil conflict management rhetoric by states, it features most strongly in the speeches of the P3 and a handful of allies. However, it is notable that China and Russia and other states opposed to elements of R2P still engaged in non-HRVs framing in the case of the Syrian civil war as a means of promoting non-intervention. This suggests the power of such norms in regulating "civil conflict rhetoric," even among the norm's opponents.

Supplementary materials

The supplementary files are available at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/2053168017702982. The replication files are available at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7WIRJ7.

Notes

1 http://www.un.org/en/sc/meetings/records/2011.shtml
2 At two of the meetings—16 November 2015 and 22 December 2015—the representative of the UK did not speak.
3 For brevity, the other 32 states are shown Figures A6 and A7 in the Online Appendix.

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