

# Interpreting the Syria vote: Three ways parliamentary war powers shape British foreign policy

## Introduction

On 29 August 2013 the House of Commons met to consider British intervention in the Syrian civil war. Prime Minister David Cameron asked MPs to approve airstrikes against the embattled Assad regime in response to a chemical attack on civilians in Damascus nine days before. Dramatically, and unexpectedly, they refused. Cameron became the first prime minister to lose a parliamentary vote on military action since Lord North in 1782. Having lost his main ally, President Obama postponed US action indefinitely. British domestic opinion opposed involvement in another Middle Eastern conflict. Both the public and the press doubted the efficacy of military action following years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and after watching post-Qathafi Libya sliding into chaos. Several observers heralded parliament's veto as a victory for democracy, and a triumph of common sense. What the veto means in the longer term, however, remains under-researched.

Two major ambiguities still surround parliament's war powers. The first ambiguity is procedural. We can speak with more certainty about what parliamentary involvement in military deployment decisions *is not* than we can about what it *is*. Firstly, it is not a legal requirement. The historic royal prerogative grants prime ministers the power to direct the armed forces without recourse to parliament<sup>1</sup>. It is at most a *political* convention. Any future prime minister who chooses not to permit a parliamentary vote on military action may face political retribution, but they will not be breaking any laws<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, parliament has no power of initiative. MPs cannot *start* military operations. They can only *prevent* them. Thirdly, parliament does not get involved with every military deployment. MPs neither

seriously demanded not obtained a say over non-combat missions to Mali in 2013 or West Africa during the Ebola crisis. They seem primarily concerned with *major* operations involving the clear expectation that British troops will face or use deadly force. Finally, there are no set standards for the information MPs should receive before considering a military deployment decision.

The second ambiguity relates to the Syria vote's broader significance for British foreign policy. In its immediate aftermath, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne predicted a moment of 'national soul searching' about the country's role in the world<sup>3</sup>. The *Financial Times* meanwhile warned 'when France and Denmark are keener to use force...it is hard not to fear for Britain's future as a global actor'<sup>4</sup>. Britain nevertheless remains a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a valued US ally and substantial military (including nuclear) power. It joined US efforts against ISIS in Iraq in September 2014, for example. That said, the US notably did not wait for Britain before returning to Iraq, and a subsequent parliamentary report labelled the RAF's contribution 'strikingly modest'<sup>5</sup>.

There are several possible ways of understanding parliament's war powers, and of trying to clarify these two ambiguities. From a procedural perspective, we could employ the 'differentiated polity model' of British political decision-making, noting how informal coalition-building matters more than formal processes<sup>6</sup>. From a more substantive perspective, we might look to the literature on how domestic publics constrain foreign policy. This article pursues the substantive dimension using an interpretive approach<sup>7</sup>. To understand the implications of parliamentary war powers, it proposes to listen to MPs themselves. It consequently presents a detailed analysis of the debate immediately preceding the Syria vote, aiming to draw out key themes that illuminate both the specific dynamics at work on that occasion and their general implications for British foreign policy.

A close reading of the debate generated three distinct interpretations, presented in turn

below. The first interpretation treats the House of Commons as a *site for 'domestic role contestation'*<sup>8</sup>. Many MPs considered whether to intervene in Syria in light of their views on Britain's role in international society. This highlighted divisions amongst political elites over exactly what sort of stance Britain should adopt. The second interpretation sees the House of Commons as a *forum for policy debate*, where MPs exercise 'practical judgement' about foreign policy<sup>9</sup>. MPs debated military deployments for decades before Syria, but their views generally did not directly affect decision-making<sup>10</sup>. The third interpretation frames the House of Commons as an *arena for political bargaining*. The Cameron government needed not only to win the argument over Syria, but also to win the vote. The two were not directly linked.

These interpretations do not necessarily encompass every possible way that parliamentary involvement in military deployments affects British foreign policy. They do however highlight three key *parliamentary* dynamics surrounding the Syria vote, each of which has potential longer-term consequences. Parliamentary contestation both democratizes and challenges the process by which Britain adopts particular roles in the world. The fact MPs publicly dispute whether it should support the US militarily damages its status as "first ally", for example. Similarly, parliament's willingness to debate the specific merits of individual military actions could well improve the quality of government decision-making. Prime ministers know they have to justify military action in the face of critical questioning from well-informed, authoritative and potentially powerful political actors. That should force them to think more systematically about deployments before committing to a vote. At the same time, however, giving parliament a chance to second-guess the executive, publicly, introduces undesirable inconsistency into Britain's external stance. The political dimension can also have both positive and negative effects. Governments able to point to broad elite backing for their policies should be better able to implement even contentious decisions than their predecessors who were not required to win parliamentary support. But, as David

Cameron found over Syria, winning a vote requires political compromises, while holding the line politically can make it harder to get the use of force approved.

### **Parliament as a site for role contestation**

Several participants in the Syria debate referred, at least indirectly, to fairly general ideas about Britain's "role" in the world. It makes sense to begin by interpreting these comments using "role theory". Kalevi Holsti first suggested that the attitudes, decisions and actions foreign policy leaders take derive from internal, domestic 'national role conceptions'<sup>11</sup>. Later scholars highlighted the additional importance of external, foreign 'role expectations'<sup>12</sup>, and noted how both can vary according to circumstance<sup>13</sup>. At the international level, former colonies and potential rivals regularly downplay Britain's claim to global leadership<sup>14</sup> while powerful allies on both sides of the Atlantic still expect it to play a 'great power' part<sup>15</sup>. At the domestic level, British policymakers claim several different international roles. Gaskarth highlighted six distinct conceptions emerging from leaders' rhetoric; 'isolate, regional partner, influential (rule of law state), thought leader, opportunist-interventionist, and Great Power'<sup>16</sup>. This proliferation can be problematic. The claims and implications raised by different role conceptions can clash, a phenomenon known as 'role conflict'<sup>17</sup>. Tim Dunne, for example, rightly highlighted the 'fundamental incompatibility between Atlanticism and internationalism' in British foreign policy<sup>18</sup>. Britain's broadly solidarist view of international moral responsibility<sup>19</sup>, meanwhile, underlines the conflict between its commitments to liberal interventionism and to upholding the status quo<sup>20</sup>.

McCourt rightly notes that most politicians use 'Britain's *role in the world*' as a rhetorical device to challenge each other's legitimacy rather than as an analytical tool to shape foreign policy<sup>21</sup>. Simply by arguing over role conceptions, however, MPs introduce an

element of ‘role contestation’ into the policymaking process. Role contestation arises when domestic elites disagree over the international roles their state should adopt<sup>22</sup>. Thanks to their involvement in military deployment decisions, MPs now have a credible claim to foreign policy influence. Whether they use the concept of roles as an analytical device, or purely rhetorically, is irrelevant. As soon as they start discussing role conceptions they engage in contestation, at least potentially limiting how far Britain can assume particular roles at the international level. From a role theory perspective, although parliament’s war powers concern military deployment decisions specifically and not foreign policymaking more generally, any impact its debates on military action have on Britain’s national role conceptions should matter more widely.

None of the speakers in the Syria debate referred *directly* to Britain’s role in the world. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg came closest by asking ‘what kind of nation are we?’ during his closing speech. But he then took a question on chemical weapons, and never picked up the thread<sup>23</sup>. A close reading of the debate nevertheless draws out three ways MPs’ arguments *indirectly* questioned established British roles, especially Gaskarth’s “status quo power”, “liberal interventionist” and “faithful ally” conceptions. The following paragraphs set these challenges out.

### *Britain as a status quo power*

Gaskarth’s ‘influential’ role conception framed Britain as a state committed to upholding international law and order<sup>24</sup>. MPs raised two issues with this image during the Syria debate. Firstly, they questioned what exactly upholding international law and order entailed. Specifically, they disagreed over whether major powers should wait for UN Security Council approval before enforcing international law. Some took a hard pro-UN line. Caroline

Lucas (Green) and George Galloway (Respect) insisted that only the UN could approve military action. Most preferred a more nuanced approach. They recognized that bypassing the Security Council undermined international order. But they pointed to the legacy of the League of Nations to argue that such action might be necessary if the Council failed to respond to state-sponsored atrocities. Former Conservative foreign secretary Malcolm Rifkind and former Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman Menzies Campbell both made this argument. Even Labour leader Ed Miliband agreed. He insisted Britain ‘should strain every sinew’ to make the UN process work. But he refused to rule out acting without Security Council approval if necessary<sup>25</sup>.

Secondly, MPs argued over the more fundamental question of whether Britain *should* accept responsibility for maintaining international order. Richard Ottaway (Con), for example, thought Britain should meet ‘the expectations that the world community has of us’. His fellow Conservative James Arbuthnot, by contrast, warned against acting ‘as the international policeman’, noting ‘when we have done so in the past, the world has not tended to thank us’. Several speakers, meanwhile, complained about regional powers’ failure to resolve the Syrian situation themselves. Sarah Wollaston, another Conservative, wondered why Britain was ‘arming all these nations to the teeth’ if they remained unable to act independently<sup>26</sup>. Most MPs recognised foreign states expected Britain to play a “status quo” role. But many doubted those same states were willing to tolerate military expressions of that role, and most thought Britain would be left exposed if it acted without regional support.

These arguments complicated Britain’s claim to international influence. They also cast doubt over a role conception not previously much debated among decision-makers. MPs did not just bring new perspectives to this dimension of the broader debate over British foreign policy. They problematized an area policymakers (and, presumably, their counterparts overseas) thought settled.

*Britain as a liberal interventionist power*

Gaskarth's 'opportunist-interventionist' role conception highlighted Britain's efforts 'to advance liberal ideas about human rights, democracy and good governance, even at the expense of existing frameworks of international law'<sup>27</sup>. It closely mirrored Tony Blair's 'doctrine of international community' set out during the Kosovo conflict in 1999<sup>28</sup>. Before taking office Cameron promised a less activist 'liberal conservative' approach<sup>29</sup>. In power, however, he intervened abroad more frequently than Blair<sup>30</sup>. During the Syria debate, some speakers questioned the underlying morality of liberal intervention. Gerald Kaufman (Lab), for example, labelled Western efforts to spread democracy and human rights little more than 'random, murderous activity'<sup>31</sup>. Although, by contrast, several MPs claimed Britain had a "responsibility to protect" Syrian civilians, the government did not. Ministers were constrained, as Caroline Lucas highlighted, by the Security Council having reserved the exclusive right to decide when the doctrine known as R2P applied<sup>32</sup>. Britain could not simultaneously uphold the status quo and pursue liberal interventionism, a broader role conflict MPs left unresolved.

Many of the doubts MPs expressed about liberal interventionism turned on negative memories of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Though Cameron warned against letting 'the spectre of previous mistakes paralyse our ability to stand up for what is right', several speakers did exactly that. David Lammy (Lab), for example, warned Iraq showed 'liberal intervention can fail – and it can fail badly'<sup>33</sup>. He did not reject the interventionist role entirely. Few participants in the debate went that far. But many had clearly been burned by earlier experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. They preferred a more "small-c" conservative approach than the one Cameron put forward. Cameron's own efforts to combine liberalism and greater international caution showed the liberal interventionist role conception was

already contested before the Syria vote. Parliament's doubts further limited how far Britain could act internationally in line with it.

### *Britain as faithful ally to the United States*

Gaskarth's 'Great Power' role conception mostly consisted of Britain's "special relationship" with the United States<sup>34</sup>. Holsti's original article described how a 'faithful ally' state makes 'a specific commitment to supporting the policies of *another* government'<sup>35</sup>. Successive generations of British leaders sought to gain influence in Washington by demonstrating their reliability, especially through supporting the US militarily in its own "global policeman" role. They were only partially successful. Britain's contribution to US management of the international system is neither critical, nor unique<sup>36</sup>. It is more useful politically, as proof that the US is not acting unilaterally, than it is militarily<sup>37</sup>. This is why Dunne found Britain 'could influence only the timing, not the content, of decisions' made in Washington<sup>38</sup>.

When it came to Syria, however, Britain seemed unable even to influence the timing of US decision-making. In an ominous echo of debates over Iraq, MPs chafed at being summoned back to parliament early to meet what many believed was an arbitrary US deadline for airstrikes. Cameron insisted 'our actions will not be determined by my good friend and ally the American President; they will be decided by this Government and votes in this House of Commons'. But Miliband and his Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander attacked the government for following 'a timetable set elsewhere'. Some MPs, meanwhile, challenged US policy directly. Both Paul Flynn (Lab) and Edward Leigh (Con) called President Obama 'foolish' for getting drawn into Syria in the first place. Malcolm Bruce (LD) thought Obama had been 'naïve' to set a 'red line' over the use of chemical



weapons<sup>39</sup>. Truly faithful allies do not quibble over timetables or question basic strategy. Parliament did. In the process it undermined Britain's commitment to the role of faithful ally to the United States.

### *Consequences*

Similar points arose during the ISIS debate just over a year after the Syria vote. MPs mostly raised the same three role conceptions, though they treated each somewhat more favourably than before. Ed Miliband argued that Britain should uphold a 'world order governed by rules' and that meant 'protecting a democratic state', namely Iraq, from a non-state threat like ISIS<sup>40</sup>. Some MPs who previously doubted Britain should accept significant overseas responsibilities softened once regional powers made meaningful military contributions. Hugh Bayley (Lab), for example, refused to 'shoulder the burden' of intervention in Syria. But he thought Britain should 'contribute to global security and not be a passive consumer of security provided by others' when it came to fighting ISIS<sup>41</sup>.

Several MPs thought Britain had a moral duty to protect Iraqi civilians. As Greg Mulholland (LD) put it, 'we simply cannot turn a blind eye to genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the most appalling sorts of religious persecution we have seen since, frankly, the concentration camps'. Jeremy Corbyn (Lab) raised a lonely voice of dissent, complaining of double standards inherent in the West's tolerance of Saudi human rights violations<sup>42</sup>. He notably did not reject the "liberal" aspect of "liberal interventionism", only its selective application. Some "small-c" conservatism remained. Peter Hain (Lab) attributed the fighting in Iraq to earlier 'cowboy western intervention' while Edward Leigh (Con) complained that 'the British Government are indirectly culpable in fostering the conditions for jihadism'. But

pro-intervention speakers turned this observation on its head. As Miliband put it, ‘there is a heightened responsibility for us precisely because we did intervene in Iraq’<sup>43</sup>.

MPs debating fighting ISIS proved far more willing to follow the US. Former Cabinet Minister Ken Clarke (Con), for example, supported intervention ‘because some of our best allies are taking part’. Clarke previously showed his commitment to Britain’s allies when he abstained from the Syria vote. Gerald Howarth (Con) thought ‘it is very important that we should be standing alongside our friends in the United States; they are our closest ally’. Some still contested Britain’s role as “faithful ally”. Paul Flynn (Lab), for example, asked ‘why cannot we become independent in our foreign policy?’<sup>44</sup>. But these arguments were less extensive and less intense, blunting their effect.

Even so, the debate on Syria probably did damage Britain’s status as “faithful ally” to the United States. To a degree this was inevitable; the “faithful ally” role sets a very high bar. As soon as a state expresses any sort of independence it immediately deviates from Holsti’s model. Pro-intervention commentators fretted about what the Syria veto meant for US-UK relations. The *Sun*, for example, announced the end of the “special relationship” with a front page ‘death notice’<sup>45</sup>. But domestic role contestation does not automatically alter national roles. For a fundamental role shift to occur, other states must agree. And US policymakers seemed fairly sanguine about parliament’s veto. US Ambassador to London Matthew Barzun and Secretary of State John Kerry both quickly insisted after the vote that the transatlantic alliance remained strong<sup>46</sup>. Disagreeing with the White House is not the same thing as disagreeing with the US as a nation, which helped<sup>47</sup>. Congress, for example, showed no more enthusiasm than parliament for intervention in Syria<sup>48</sup>. At the same time, however, Obama responded to the British veto by heaping praise on the ‘renewed’ Franco-US alliance<sup>49</sup>. He notably did not wait for British assistance before striking ISIS in Iraq, suggesting there were at least some grounds for concern.

Even if parliament's function as a site for domestic role contestation has affected Britain's ability to claim certain roles coherently, this is not necessarily a negative development. Nor does it inevitably point toward a fundamental shift in its foreign policy stance. Both the "liberal interventionist" and "faithful ally" role conceptions only really reached prominence under Tony Blair<sup>50</sup>. We might treat parliament's willingness to contest both as a natural corrective, shifting the country away from an unpopular willingness to follow the US into warzones, and back towards a less forceful approach to upholding international order based on law, the UN and diplomacy. Many other states would welcome such a shift<sup>51</sup>, and Britain has successfully adjusted its overall stance before without, for example, abandoning its claim to great power<sup>52</sup>. Even this suggestion raises difficulties, however, because MPs disagree over the meaning of international order. Whether they disagree to score political points or because they genuinely conceive of Britain's proper role in the world differently does not matter. During debates over military deployment decisions, parliament serves as a site for role contestation which confuses the stance the country presents to the world. This, in turn, potentially limits the coherence of British foreign policymaking overall.

### **Parliament as a forum for policy debate**

Parliament is well equipped to serve as a forum for foreign policy debate. It already fulfils this function for domestic legislation. While not every MP who spoke on Syria said something about Britain's role in the world, most commented on the specific merits of the government's proposal. They employed three main criteria. Firstly, they asked whether the use of force was actually necessary. Specifically, they doubted the evidence the government presented showing the Assad regime was responsible for the use of chemical weapons against

civilians in Damascus. Distrust bred during debates over Iraq led many to speak out against the case for a further military engagement based primarily on evidence from secret intelligence. Secondly, they questioned whether ministers possessed “right authority” to order intervention. Specifically, they expressed a more general lack of trust in official judgements, pointed to the absence of clear UN Security Council approval and highlighted the scale of public opposition. Finally, they worried about whether military action would succeed. Some thought the proposed intervention too small to make a difference. Others feared British entanglement and “mission creep”. Across all three criteria, MPs found the government’s plans wanting. This helps us understand why they vetoed intervention in Syria. It also points to how parliament’s function as a forum for debating specific military deployments interacts with British foreign policy more generally.

### *Necessity*

MPs repeatedly questioned whether it was actually necessary for outside forces to intervene in Syria. While there was plenty of public evidence showing *someone* carried out a chemical attack on 20 August, none of it proved the Assad regime was responsible. UN weapons inspectors were still working at the apparent attack site, though they promised only to confirm *that* chemical weapons had been used, not who had used them. The government gave MPs a Joint Intelligence Committee report concluding it was ‘highly likely’ the regime was responsible, and that ‘there are no plausible alternative scenarios’<sup>53</sup>. But MPs were sceptical. Jack Straw summed up the problem, noting that ‘one of the consequences of the intelligence failure on Iraq has been to raise the bar that we have to get over when the question of military action arises’. Several critics honed in on the JIC’s failure to identify a motive for the attacks. George Galloway, for example, argued ‘it is not that the regime is not

bad enough to do it; everybody knows that it is bad enough to do it. The question is: is it mad enough to do it?’<sup>54</sup>. MPs seem particularly suspicious of secret intelligence, perhaps because they cannot verify it independently. Some will believe the opposite of whatever ministers say if they only offer evidence not otherwise in the public domain. Several agreed with Diane Abbott (Lab), who asked ‘who benefits?’ from Western intervention in Syria, and concluded it was the opposition<sup>55</sup>. They ignored official assurances that the opposition lacked the capacity to deliver an attack of the sort apparently seen in Damascus. Without being able to rely on intelligence evidence, ministers found it impossible to convince MPs of the necessity of intervention.

### *Authority*

MPs questioned the government’s authority in three ways during the Syria debate. Firstly, several MPs, mindful of alleged government dishonesty during the Iraq debate ten years before, distrusted ministerial arguments on principle. Roger Godsiff (Lab), for example, said he ‘would never again believe one single solitary assurance given by any Prime Minister’. Cheryl Gillan (Con), meanwhile, refused to ‘sit here and be duped again’. Secondly, a number of MPs thought the UN Security Council, rather than the British government, should decide when military action was required to uphold international order. Caroline Lucas told Cameron that, in her view, ‘without explicit UN Security Council reinforcement, military action simply would not be legal under international law’<sup>56</sup>. The government offered a further memo, this time from the Attorney-General, supporting its legal position. But, as with the JIC memo, it convinced few MPs. Finally, some speakers pointed out that just 22% of opinion poll respondents favoured British intervention<sup>57</sup>. Cameron conclusively did not have the country behind him, which further undermined his authority.

Parliament's questions about government authority during the Syria debate raised broader difficulties for British foreign policy. MPs, mindful of the Tony Blair's apparent dishonesty over Iraq, no longer trust ministers. They seem to think international organisations are more legitimate than their own government. If parliament dislikes a particular proposal, meanwhile, public qualms reinforce its opposition. Together these doubts undermine the government's claim to foreign policy authority. They limit how far ministers can propose military action simply because they, as elected leaders, consider it in the national interest or in the interest of the wider world. This links back to the procedural dimension of parliamentary war powers. A prime minister might legally be able to bypass parliament. But he will struggle to do so legitimately.

MPs do not trust ministers. They expect them to *prove* the threats they describe exist, that their actions will not undermine the international order they claim to uphold, and that the public supports their proposals. Ministers can expect no deference to the fact they hold information MPs lack. In fact, MPs are particularly loathe to support proposals based on secret information (whether intelligence evidence or legal advice) because they do not trust ministers to reflect it accurately. This reflects a significant loss of government authority, a major reason why MPs demanded a vote on military deployments in the first place.

### *Success*

Several MPs thought military intervention in Syria simply would not work. Possibly in part because they doubted the government's authority, as Anthony Lang suggests<sup>58</sup>, very few accepted that punishing the Assad regime for using chemical weapons was a viable or legitimate objective. MPs thought the proposed goals of intervention both too limited and too vague, and dangerous on both counts. Cameron said any strikes would be 'solely about

detering and degrading the future use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime—full stop, end of story’. He did not propose to end the civil war or protect civilians from conventional attacks. Dai Havard (Lab) called this ‘nonsense and a ridiculous proposition’. Britain should either intervene properly or not get involved at all. Michael Meacher (Lab) meanwhile warned that “surgical” strikes often go astray, while “limited” military campaigns frequently escalate. Some speakers worried specifically about “mission creep”. Julian Lewis (Con) warned the region was ‘a powder keg, and we should not be lobbing weapons into the heart of such combustible material’. Diane Abbott thought the government had ‘no idea of what victory would look like’, and so ultimately no possibility of achieving it.

No government can promise military action will succeed. It is apparently quite difficult to avoid mission creep. MPs find both issues troubling. Cameron’s inability to answer several of their more critical questions on this front did not help his case. He found himself caught between two poles and unable to extricate himself. Either his intervention would be too small to make a difference on the ground, or large enough to get British troops embroiled in a messy civil war with few clear objectives and no end in sight.

### *Consequences*

As with its role contestation function, parliament also operated as a forum for policy debate when the government proposed sending British forces back to Iraq in September 2014. Few MPs doubted the necessity of action against ISIS. Ministers did not need to rely on intelligence evidence. MPs could watch YouTube videos of ISIS fighters with London accents beheading captives, including British civilian aid workers. Cameron found it much easier to claim the authority to order an attack. Acting against ISIS meant assisting a sovereign government asking for help, not attacking one denying any wrongdoing. 57% of

poll respondents wanted Britain to join the US and regional allies in launching airstrikes<sup>59</sup>. He only really struggled when it came to the third criterion. Again, some MPs thought the action Cameron proposed too small to make a meaningful difference. Edward Leigh, for example, called it ‘gesture politics’. Others, such as veteran Dennis Skinner (Lab), warned about inevitable ‘mission creep’. Most wound up with Frank Dobson (Lab), however. ‘The odds look as though we will not succeed’, he concluded, ‘yet I find that I am probably going to vote for the motion’<sup>60</sup>. On this occasion, necessity and authority proved sufficient to win parliament’s approval.

Subjecting military deployment decisions to parliamentary scrutiny makes them more democratic. It could also improve their substance. The fact governments know they have to debate their decisions publicly should encourage them to spend as much time and effort as possible getting things right before involving MPs. At the same time, however, the Syria debate shows how parliamentary deliberations over military action affect British foreign policy overall. By challenging and possibly countermanding government decisions MPs can bring further incoherence to Britain’s external stance beyond that caused by their role contestation efforts. They do not negotiate directly with foreign leaders, meaning differences must be aired in public rather than resolved in private. They also do not behave consistently from one proposal to the next. Different individual MPs speak in different debates. Sixty-one spoke on Syria, fifty-eight on ISIS, but only twenty-three on both. Individuals also change their minds. Ninety-six MPs spoke in one or both debates. Only forty-one voted consistently either for or against government policy. Most were Labour MPs who followed their leader, opposing action in Syria and supporting action against ISIS. But some, like Tory grandee Kenneth Clarke, simply saw the two questions differently. These issues are likely to recur and grow more acute if MPs successfully use their veto over military deployments as a lever to gain greater parliamentary influence over foreign policy decision-making more generally.



Chris Brown defended the ‘inconsistency’ in a state’s willingness to use force overseas that results from an *ad hoc*, contextual approach to decision-making<sup>61</sup>. But the inconsistency parliament introduces goes far beyond the sort of common sense stance Brown praised. For example, it brings the executive and legislative branches of British government into conflict, causing public ructions within the institutions of the state itself. And even Brown’s fairly mild form of inconsistency can be damaging for a country that typically pursues major international initiatives in conjunction with military allies and regional partners. Christopher Coker once aptly presented Britain’s ‘fundamental dependability’, especially to the US, as a critical strategic asset capable of mitigating its relative material decline<sup>62</sup>. Henry Kissinger meanwhile has warned that ‘in international affairs a reputation for reliability is a more important asset than demonstrations of tactical cleverness’<sup>63</sup>. MPs may have been right to veto action in Syria. The proposal was badly thought through and not terribly coherent. But in the process they cast doubt on Britain’s internal foreign policy consistency, and so on its external reliability. Parliamentary policy debates, like parliamentary role contestation, make Britain’s approach to international affairs more democratic and potentially more rational. They also make it less consistent and potentially less effective as a result.

### **Parliament as a political institution**

Both parliament’s role contestation and policy debate functions shaped how the Syria veto became possible. But neither directly determined the outcome of the vote. Most MPs did not speak in the debate on 29 August 2013. Roughly 10% of those in principle eligible to speak actually did. The vast majority of MPs *did* vote, though, and crucially most of those who voted followed party lines. Cameron needed to win the argument over Syria, to shore up

his own preferred role conceptions and to legitimize the decision to use force. But only a handful of “undecided” votes were ever up for grabs in the House of Commons chamber itself. To get his proposal approved, he needed to strike two distinct political bargains. At the intra-party level, Cameron worked to maintain the support of his own back-benchers. Knowing this was going to be difficult, he also sought at the inter-party level to get the Labour opposition on board. He failed on both counts.

### *Intra-party bargaining*

It is a simple fact of parliamentary democracy that majority governments have more to fear from their own back-benchers than they do from opposition parties who cannot, by definition, vote them out of office without help. This was why Tony Blair spent far less time wooing Conservatives over Iraq than he did trying to secure Labour Party support. The Conservatives could not defeat him, whereas Labour rebels could. Cameron faced a harder task in 2013 over Syria because he led a coalition. He not only needed to keep his fellow Conservatives onside, he also needed Liberal Democrat support just to retain his majority. Even in light of these tougher odds, however, Cameron performed badly. Perhaps lulled into a false sense of security by the easy passage of the vote on intervention in Libya in 2011, he failed to do his political homework properly. He realized only after recalling parliament that many Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs did not support an immediate intervention. Even after he significantly moderated his proposals, thirty-nine Conservatives and seventeen Liberal Democrats still withheld their support, eliminating his majority and leaving him reliant on Labour votes.

Prime ministers used to be able to discipline recalcitrant back-benchers by designating a vote on a controversial issue a matter of confidence in the government<sup>64</sup>. This meant any

government MP voting against it was also voting their colleagues out of office, and potentially risking their own job at the following election. Although he never said as much explicitly, Tony Blair strongly implied that he would treat the Iraq vote as a judgement on his own continuation in office, warning Labour MPs who preferred that Britain sit out the US-led invasion ‘I will not be party to such a course’<sup>65</sup>. They could keep Blair or save Saddam, but they could not do both. The Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011 removed this power<sup>66</sup>. Cameron could not discipline rebels with the spectre of a snap general election, as Blair and others earlier had. This meant he did not have to resign after losing the vote. But the possibility of the government falling probably would have won him additional support, and he only needed a handful of rebels to change stance.

### *Inter-party bargaining*

Cameron also faced a tougher task when it came to winning opposition support. Labour traditionally opposes military action, while the Conservatives traditionally support it. In Iain Duncan Smith, Blair faced an opposition leader even keener to invade Iraq than he was. Cameron, by contrast, had to offer to wait for a UN report and to hold a further parliamentary vote to get Labour backing for his Syria strategy. Then, on the day of the debate, Miliband moved an amendment subtly weakening the government motion. Both he and Douglas Alexander blamed briefings from Downing Street for Labour’s late opposition. They claimed spokesmen told journalists that a “yes” vote meant “in principle” approval for military action that could start almost immediately, contradicting Cameron’s promise to wait. This argument proved particularly damaging to the legitimacy of the government proposal because it fuelled MPs’ existing suspicions about the timing of the vote. Joan Ruddock (Lab), for example, interrupted Cameron to suggest ‘that this House has been recalled in order to

give cover for possible military action this weekend', despite the motion's clear promise of a further debate before any actual strike took place<sup>67</sup>. A whole series of back-benchers asked Nick Clegg, wrapping up for the government, to confirm the government would not use a "yes" vote as cover for immediate intervention. Each time he confirmed as much, they asked again. They simply did not believe him.

For all the party leaders tried to talk up their differences, they put forward near-identical policy proposals. If parliamentary votes depended primarily on role conceptions or on individual judgements many MPs should have voted consistently in both Syria votes. That they did not suggests that political considerations proved more significant on this occasion. A handful of MPs opposed military action under any circumstances, and voted accordingly. Jim Fitzpatrick (Lab), for example, concluded he could only be 'honest and consistent' by voting against both the government motion and the opposition amendment<sup>68</sup>. A further forty-six MPs joined him in both "no" lobbies, while another thirty MPs abstained on one vote (usually the one put forward by their own party) and voted no on the other. What really cost Cameron was the fact that no-one voted *for* both proposals. Labour MPs Meg Munn and Pat McFadden both vocally supported intervention during the debate. Munn did not vote at all, while McFadden voted against the government. Menzies Campbell could 'find no difference of substance or principle anywhere in the two offerings'<sup>69</sup>. Yet he still voted along party lines. Just under ninety percent of voting MPs did the same. The result was striking. Five hundred and seventy-five MPs voted in one or both divisions. Four hundred and ninety-two voted for either the government motion or the opposition amendment. Neither passed, even though they were essentially the same. With a hard core of rebels determined to oppose any possibility of military action, and the majority divided along party lines, neither government nor opposition secured majority support, despite the fact most MPs supported some version of the policy proposed.

## *Consequences*

Parliamentary involvement in decisions about military action politicizes the most dramatic expression of British foreign policy. It forces policymakers to pursue intra-party and inter-party bargains to get the use of force overseas approved. This process, ironically, makes parliamentary decision-making less directly democratic. Blair won the vote on Iraq comfortably because he secured both intra-party and inter-party support, despite high levels of public opposition in the weeks preceding the start of the campaign. Cameron resolved to fight ISIS in Iraq but not in Syria to secure Ed Miliband's support. Both opinion polls and several speakers in the ISIS debate thought this restriction unnecessary and absurd<sup>70</sup>.

Parliamentary politicking damages prime ministerial credibility, and this has knock-on consequences abroad. If the British government threatens military action, its allies and enemies know its ability to follow through depends not just on prime ministerial resolve but also on partisan bargaining. A prime minister's ability to deliver his promises internationally now depends far more heavily on his command of the political environment at home. This might contribute to a further erosion of allied states' faith in Britain's ability to follow through on its commitments, not just in the military sphere but also more generally.

## **Conclusion**

Political bargaining dynamics largely determined the Syria vote. David Cameron lost because he lost Labour support, and because he failed to co-opt sufficient Conservative and Liberal Democrat back-benchers. He lost because his aides briefed too aggressively, and because Ed Miliband seized the opportunity to undermine the government while burnishing his own left-wing credentials. Cameron could have compromised. He could have accepted

the Labour amendment. The positions the two sides put forward were not exactly identical. But they were probably close enough. Cameron, however, tried to win without depending on Miliband. This turned out to be an error.

While politics proved decisive on this occasion, this article has also shown that parliament's functions as a site for role contestation and as a forum for policy debate affect both specific decisions about military deployments and more general considerations surrounding British foreign policy. After a brief foray into being an uncritical "faithful ally" under Tony Blair, parliament's veto of military action in Syria marked a potential shift back towards a broadly supportive but more independent British stance. US policymakers know they can probably still rely on British political support. But they have learnt not to assume Britain will join every US-led military campaign. President Obama's decision not to wait for British help before striking ISIS, but to welcome its participation a few weeks into the campaign, underlines this point. Britain has not become a pacifist state. The ISIS vote, and the supportive poll results accompanying it, demonstrate as much. Both the public and parliament will only back military action, though, if they think it is consistent with a fairly conservative account of Britain's global role, if it looks both necessary and justifiable under international law, and if they think it will work.

These developments make British foreign policy more democratic. Democracy can be a useful strategic asset. It lends legitimacy to government decisions. It might also, as we have discussed, help improve the quality of policymaking. Yet too much democracy is problematic from a foreign policy perspective. Parliament does not behave like a single unitary actor. This makes Britain's approach to the use of force overseas inconsistent, since different members express different (and sometimes contradictory) views on different occasions. Parliament is willing to contradict the government publicly, and even to veto major military deployments that have already been announced, as was the case with the Syria vote. This makes Britain's

approach to the use of force overseas incoherent. Inconsistency and incoherence matter internationally because they make Britain less reliable. There are still important procedural ambiguities around parliamentary war powers, though each time MPs vote on the use of force they reinforce the convention and clarify additional points. Cameron recalled the House in August 2013, for example, because William Hague promised during the Libya debate that MPs would always vote *before* the start of military action in future. By treating parliament as a site for role contestation, a forum for policy debate and an arena for political bargaining, however, we can perhaps move a step closer to understanding what parliamentary war powers mean in substantive terms.

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