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Narratives modes and foreign policy change: the debate on the 2015 Iran nuclear deal

Abstract

This article sheds light on the way narratives translate into policy outcomes and enable foreign policy change. How is it that narratives shape foreign policy change? The analysis focuses on the public discursive strategy employed during the US Congress debate over the 60-day review period of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This article intends to contribute to the literature on policy narratives in International Relations (IR). I argue that foreign policy decisions are framed in a manner that seeks to ensure their supremacy in the context of a process of political contestation of meaning and of attempts to deconstruct and delegitimise alternative narratives.

Keywords: JCPOA, Iran, Obama, Narratives, Rhetorical modes.

Introduction

This article sheds light on the way rhetorical strategies, namely narratives, translate into policy outcomes and enable foreign policy change. How is it that narratives shape foreign policy change? The analysis focuses on the public narrative strategy employed during the congressional debate over the 60-day review period of the JCPOA.[1]

This paper draws on Ronald Krebs's theory on the role of narratives in national security policy. This being the case, the important question arises: how should a narrative project be presented in order to gain traction in the political field? The Obama administration managed to get the nuclear deal with Iran in the face of the tremendous opposition it faced due to deeply

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[1] Under the May 22, 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, once a nuclear agreement was negotiated with Iran, Congress had 60 days to pass a resolution of approval, of disapproval, or do nothing.

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

held opposition in numerous domestic policy circles, the efforts of congressional Republicans to scuttle the negotiations, as well as initial opposition by dozens of House and Senate Democrats who threatened to vote against the nuclear agreement.

I want to contribute to this emerging subfield of study of narrative politics by testing Krebs's model operationalizing narrative situations and rhetorical modes. The first step is to identify the rhetorical modes employed in the debate and display their structure. Based on the narrative analysis, I will use the same methodological approach used by Oppermann and Spencer's study of the discursive contest over the Iran nuclear deal (2018) to elicit the rhetorical modes depicting the deal. However, contrary to those authors, I argue that both sides of the debate actually did not use a similar narrative structure. My empirical contribution is to use the JCPOA's case study to operationalize Krebs's model on the process of creation and demise of a national security narrative. Krebs's approach is at the juncture of domestic narratives and foreign policy, knitting together agency, structure, and the logic of domestic politics.

I conclude that Obama was fairly successful in challenging the extant, dominant narrative (Krebs 2015b, 3), by using arguments and relying on "rhetorical coercion". Bially Mattern (2005, 586) offers a similar argument via "representational force", a sociolinguistic process, whereby a speaker forces an audience to identify with his or her narrative representation of reality. Surprisingly, Obama had to coerce into acquiescence (Holland and Aaronson 2014, 2), not his rivals – every Republican senator voted against the deal –, but rather the members of his own party. The administration mustered enough votes in the Senate to fend off Republican efforts to kill the Iran deal. However, many Democrats reluctantly agreed to vote for the deal, but only after an unusually thorough scrutiny of the issues involved.

This article intends to contribute to the burgeoning literature on policy narratives in international relations, specifically on how they can shape foreign policy changes. Narratives, in particular, can "cause" policy and be "constitutive" of policy possibilities (Browning 2008). This work is in line with other studies that posit that including policy narratives as a causal variable in the policy process is quite helpful (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019), and could also be critical when arguing for a major foreign policy change.

A qualitative and inductive approach will thus be used to systematically explore the official political discourse in Congress, from September 10 to September 16, ahead of the September 17 deadline for Congressional vote on the JCPOA. The texts under analysis are the Congressional debates, accessed online through the Library of Congress website, as well as Obama's main speeches on the JCPOA.[2]

This article is structured as follows. The first section provides a short outline of the expanding field of policy narratives, and explains the different rhetorical modes, highlighting the difference between arguments and storytelling. Section two lays out Krebs's model on the

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[2] For the full text of the debates, see Proceedings and Debates of the 114th Congress, first session, vol. 161, issues no. 130, 131, 132, and 133 (House of Representatives debates of 10, 11, and 16 September, and Senate debates of 10, 11, 15 and 16 September).

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

rise and fall of dominant narratives. Section three maps the domestic debate on the Iran deal, as gauged from documentary analysis of congressional debates, by eviscerating the arguments and the narrative involved. Part four discusses how the opposing parties to the debate deployed different rhetorical modes. Part five analyses the alignment with the narrative situation, and gauges the effectiveness of the rhetorical device used by the advocates of the JCPOA. The final section outlines the main conclusions.

Narratives and Arguments

Policy is the outcome of a rhetorical battle (Neumann 2002, 629) by policymakers, social players and stakeholders between competing images of society and national interest. As Hampton put it: "Narrative policy analysis consists of the identification of narratives which describe policy dilemmas" (2009, 228). Discourses and narratives form an essential foundation of competing claims, not only because they translate a certain understanding of social reality, but also, they are strategically deployed by political actors to promote a preferred interpretation of social reality in order to construct and modify policy.

The recent "narrative turn" in International Relations (Subotić 2016) has emphasized the causal role played by narratives in politics. It warrants "the discursive construction of international relations" (Holland and Aaronson 2014, 3), unveiling how states and political actors project narratives in the international system (Miskimmon et al. 2015; De Graaf et al. 2015; Roberts 2006; O'Bryan et al. 2014; Breuer and Johnston 2019; Suganami 2008; Linklater 2009; Boswell 2011; Goddard and Krebs 2015a; Krebs 2015b; Cloet 2017; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019; Kuusisto 2019; Holland 2020).

A variety of IR theoretical approaches could be applied to explain the policy choices of actors (see Tagma and Lenze 2020), although there is not sufficient space here to elaborate on them. Mainstream IR theories postulate policymakers' actions are guided primarily by the logic of international relations, but how they put this into practice is guided by narrative devices. The argument made here is that the application of discourse analysis can bring to light how actors use the material and features of discourse to construct narratives for strategic purposes (Miskimmon et al. 2015, 38).

The explanatory power of narratives, therefore, is best understood as providing opportunities for action, while foreclosing possibility for others (Subotić 2016, 613). It is not in providing linear causality of political action. Narratives are social structures that create expectations, interests, and, ultimately, cultural cognitive boundaries which sanction or constrain activities of political actors. From an instrumental point of view, the significance of narratives in the political realm derives from its role as a type of mobilisational capital. Leaders strategically deploy specific narratives to persuade potential adherents to follow a particular course of action, thereby turning narratives into political resources.

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Analysing the evidence drawn from US debates over national security from the 1930s to the 2000s, Krebs states that policy makers can deploy two rhetorical modes to convey their policy projects: storytelling and arguments (Krebs 2015b). The discussion starts by exploring and delimiting the concepts: what are the differences between arguments and narratives?

As Crawford (2009) noted, the process of argumentation is central to political action: "argument is the process that underpins (almost) all other forms of action, including strategic action and norm guided behaviour" (Crawford 2009, 105). Arguments are distinguished from other forms of speech by their logical form: they are verified "by eventual appeal to procedures of establishing formal and empirical proof" (Bruner 1980, 11). They are used to persuade an audience of the appropriateness or correctness of a given course of action (Krebs 2015b, 37).

However, for a message to resonate with an audience, it has to appear compelling: "narratives often engage the recipient and transport him or her into the world of the story" (Schreiner et al. 2018, 371). Arguments are particularly persuasive if they are woven into a story structure, with a high narrative context (high narrativity) (Schreiner et al. 2018, 372). However, arguments also need to be taken from a well-established repertoire (Kornprobst and Senn 2017): "Compelling arguments are inter-subjectively valid and resonate with the prior beliefs of the recipients, whereas unconvincing arguments are not regarded as accurate, normatively appropriate or factually correct by the participants in a debate" (Panke 2010, 65). Thus, arguments must be "drawn on or project a value system that is not itself the object of contest and on a relatively stable array of underlying narratives" (Krebs 2015b, 37).

The main difference between the two rhetorical modes lies in the fact that "arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness" (Bruner 1980, 11). Narratives are not just accounts of events, or unmediated facts, but rather "how they came to be narrated" (Krebs 2015b, 171). Policy narratives are strategically deployed by political actors, as "persuasive stories for some political end" (McBeth et al. 2014, 539), such as winning an election, or influencing the development of policies. Individuals and policy-makers can use narratives to achieve their political objectives, namely by appealing to emotions, metaphors, or historical analogies. Actually, it does not matter whether the story is accurate (Bruner 1980, 11). What matters is the specific shape it gives to the representation of certain events or political processes, and, ultimately on how appealing it is to the targeted audiences (Schmitt 2018, 489; McBeth et al. 2014, 539).

Secondly, narratives are used for policy-making regarding a specific issue, due to its complexity, uncertainty, or polarising potential. Narratives, policy, strategy, or otherwise, provide simplifications for complex or value-laden problems in public debates, and steer toward specific response strategies. Thirdly, policy narratives are meant to enable decision-makers to fashion policy changes or to craft alternatives.

Narrative studies have structured policy narratives for empirical analysis (for example, McBeth et al. 2014) into emblematic narrative components (Weible and Sabatier 2017; Jones et al. 2014; McBeth et al. 2014, 228; Jones and McBeth 2010; Oppermann and Spencer 2018). Inspired by narratology, and a growing field of policy process theories, a policy narrative has certain standard features.

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Typically, a policy narrative has four core components: "a setting, a plot, characters (hero, villain, and victim)", and is "disseminated toward a preferred policy outcome (the moral of the story)" (Shanahan et al. 2011, 539). An effective narrative is able to connect all the elements of a plot, claiming the identification of causal mechanisms.

Krebs's Rhetorical Modes

Krebs's work on narratives inquires into when and in what circumstances did particular narratives on national security become dominant, and how and when do these dominant narratives lose hold or collapse. He puts forward three factors relevant to the rise and fall of narratives: the right moment to advance a new policy project, the proper institutionalised authority, and the rhetorical mode. He argues that the challenges faced when trying to replace or undermine a pre-existent, dominant narrative may be dependent on the context and narrative mode used. A crucial point is that actors can use one of two rhetorical modes – storytelling or argumentation – depending on how settled narrative structures actually are.

In the political arena, an effective rhetoric must be aligned with the narrative situation. While policymakers tend to match their rhetorical mode to the political context, they sometimes misinterpret the political environment, deploying an inappropriate or mismatched rhetorical mode (Krebs 2015b, 42). Such choice may be fatal to convince the audience of the intended political project. To study how those factors interact, Krebs proposes a theoretical framework focusing on two variables: the narrative situation (settled or unsettled), and the rhetorical mode used by speakers (argument or storytelling). This model can be applied across different topics and case studies. It highlights instances where the rhetorical mode matches particular political contexts, as well as situations where policymakers deploy an inappropriate or mismatched rhetorical mode (Krebs 2015, 42). Krebs contends that crafting a new narrative on national security is possible only when times are unsettled (Krebs 2015b, 5). In other words, narrative changes are more likely to occur in unsettled situations, when the public demands a reassuring narrative that gives meaning to contexts of radical discontinuity and instability, such as September 11. In those circumstances, if presidents employ the rhetoric of storytelling, by introducing a new narrative on national security, the proposed narrative is more likely to stick.

This article makes the case that, as regards the congressional approval of the Iran deal, there was no "critical juncture" for a new narrative project and for toppling the previous narrative (Krebs 2015b, 33). Furthermore, the Obama administration was at a disadvantage because it deployed an argumentative strategy against a full-fledged "Iran narrative", with Tehran depicted as the ultimate "bad character" (Ferrero 2013; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2020, 11). However, the Democrat strategy was able to prevail and to marginalise opponents through "rhetorical coercion" – an "alternative" political rhetorical device (2007, 36).

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Krebs and Jackson suggest that there are rhetorical traps used in the discursive battlefield (Holland 2020, 88) which narrow possible alternative policy articulations and foreclose opponents' counterclaims. Rhetorical coercion is the process by which "through skilful framing, [claimants are able to] leave their opponents without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal" (Krebs and Jackson 2007, 36). Mattern proposed a similar concept in 2005, when she drew attention to the "coercive form of power that is exercised through language" (Mattern 2005, 583. That form of power "operates through the structure of a speaker's narrative representation of 'reality'" (Mattern 2005, 586). In international politics, actors strategically construct narratives about reality in an attempt of coercing another actor into a certain behaviour. The author avers (2005a) that in political contests of power, decision-makers can use language to rhetorically trap the claimants' opponents, seeking to defeat the dissent through verbal fighting. Representational force "exploits the fragility of the sociolinguistic 'realities' that constitute the victim's Self", threatening to harm the victim's ontological security (Mattern 2005, 586). "Representational force" is deployed when an actor "bluntly, self-interestedly and non-negotiably compels his victim to abide by his version of some contested story" (Mattern 2005, 351; McDonald and Merefield 2010, 190).

In the context of the JCPOA, the concept of rhetorical coercion is particularly relevant, as it suggests that the opposition, as well as undecided Democratic politicians, were compelled to acquiesce through the administration's deploying of the argument that warmongers were stoking the flames of war, in a re-enactment of the 2003 war against Iraq. Under the model presented by Krebs and Jackson, this rhetorical device spells defeat in public discourse: "opponents have been talked into a corner, compelled to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject" (Krebs and Jackson 2007, 36). In the JCPOA case, we suggest that the administration attempted to coerce opponents into vetoing the agreement by suggesting that they were like the "cheerleaders for the Iraq war [...] the greatest foreign policy mistake in the history of the United States of America" (DeFazio, H5874).[3]

One can test Krebs's model of narratives rise to dominance by analysing the interplay of rhetorical strategy and structural context. In particular, this article will look into the rhetorical approach used in the JCPOA debate, to then, secondarily, probe its alignment with the political environment of the time. The following section summarises the main narrative on Iran from the opposing sides. It maps the main arguments and narratives gleaned from presidential speeches and Congressional proceedings. I chose to use three narrative components as the most practical device to organise the analysis of the different arguments and narratives. Narratology provides the theoretical means to disaggregate the component parts of competing policy narratives, and identify patterns, as well as to flesh out the main arguments.

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[3] For simplification purposes, citations of the Congressional Record quoting a specific speaker are presented indicating the speaker's surname and the page number in the Congress Records. For example: Hatch S6545 for the Senate debate, or Pelosi H5901 for the House debate.

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Case Study: The JCPOA Debate

The Policy Narrative

The Setting

Advocates of the agreement present both a normative and instrumental line to defend it. President Obama and Democratic members of Congress highlighted the values underpinning the policy approach and the method, which is the pursuit of a peaceful solution based on diplomacy and multilateralism (The White House 2015b).

The Obama administration highlighted the importance of the nuclear issue with Iran as "the most consequential foreign policy debate that our country has had since the invasion of Iraq" (The White House 2015a). Supporters of the deal underlined the extent of the multilateral efforts invested into the "greatest diplomatic achievement of the 21st Century" (Pelosi, H5901; The White House 2015b; Reid, S6642).

For both opponents and supporters of the agreement, the question was not whether to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, but how. The Obama administration had a clear "preference for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution of the issue — not just because of the costs of war, but also because a negotiated agreement offered a more effective, verifiable and durable resolution" (The White House 2015a).

Democrats conceded that the JCPOA solution is not optimal, but there is no better alternative for preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon (De Lauro, S5887; Pelosi, H5901; Murphy, S6639; Visclosky, E1285; King, S6556; Schakowsky, H5896-97). In fact, a major line of the Democrats' argumentation is that military action would be the likely alternative (Plaskett, E1277; Franken, S6567; King, S6557; Carper, S6555).

Advocates of the deal pointed out that if it was rejected, the prospect of maintaining or stepping up sanctions, would only work if the coalition would hold together (Van Hole, H5910; Mikulski, S6579; Franken, S6567). If Congress were to reject this deal, "the Iranians will not come back to the negotiating table. Our P5+1 partners have told us to our face that they will not come back to the table" (Murphy, S6639).

Detractors systematically chastised the negotiators for the "bad", "disastrous" deal (Hatch, S6547), even a "catastrophically bad deal" (Hatch, S6546). Critics flipped the argument about the historical nature of the deal, its "momentous nature" (Menendez, S6572), in order to state precisely the opposite: that it was a historical mistake (Cotton, S6579). Sen. Graham described it as the "biggest miscalculation in modern foreign policy history" (Graham, S6548; Sullivan, S6591; Dold, H5877; Barasso, S6549). Republicans said: "a bad deal could be worse than no deal" (Coats, S6560; Cassidy, S6637). Consequently, "if the only choice is to take this deal or leave it, then we must leave it" (Barasso, S65509).

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Democratic Senator Dick Durbin underlined the historical reach of the agreement, but admitted its shortcomings: "I wish it were stronger and better, but in the course of negotiation, we don't always get everything we want" (Durbin, S6551). Supporters of the deal stressed how the inspection regime put in place by the IAEA is one of the most exhaustive and robust in the history of nuclear non-proliferation (Markey, S6568; Jackson Lee, H5952).

The Characters

Opponents of the deal express a profound dislike for the Iranian regime. There is a "thick depiction" (Geertz 1973, 6), in a narrative mode, of Tehran's hostility towards the US, and about its malign behaviour in the Middle East. JCPOA detractors excoriate Obama for bestowing his "blessing on a nuclear program run by the anti-American, anti-Israel, Jihadist regime in Tehran" (Cotton, S6580). The Iranian regime is "one of our most dangerous foes" (Hatch, S6545); a "duplicitous and untrustworthy" regime (Johnson, S6570); "our avowed enemy" (Johnson, S6570); a "dictatorial and fanatical regime" (Cochran, S6546); the "world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism" (Nunes, H5893). The "rogue nation" (King, S6556), exhibits a "malign conduct" (McConnell, 2015), has a "destructive behavior" (Graham, S6548; Manchin, S6564; Schiff, H5893; Cummings, H5904), and is engaged in "efforts to dominate the broader Middle East" (The White House 2017).

A major accusation, consistently repeated and acknowledged on bipartisan lines, is Iran's sponsorship of terrorism (McClintock, H5876), and its destabilising role across the Middle East (Smith, H5896; Hatch, S6545, S6548; Peters, S6555; Brown, S6557; Manchin, S6565; Cotton, S6579).

A major argument is that it is a regime that, definitively, cannot be trusted: Iranians have a consistent record of not keeping agreements and of lying (Johnson, S6570). A related accusation is that of Iranian duplicity. The word "cheat" appears dozens of times in the statements to describe Iranian pattern of behaviour (Grassley, S6561; Fitzpatrick, H5872; McClintock, H5877; Sessions, H5883; Young, H5954; Kinzinger, H5954; Ryan, H5957; Coats, S6558; Risch, S6637; Perry, H5906; McClintock, H5876; Risch, S6637).

A special focus of criticism is the figure of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei (Coats, S6558; Johnson, S6570; Nunes, H5893). He calls America "the great Satan" (Price, H5964; Babin, H5971; McHenry, H5902; Hatch, S6545; Graham, S6547; Daines, S6551; Coats, S6558; Cotton S6579). Khamenei "stated that he will 'never' permit inspectors to inspect Iran's military bases" (Smith, H5895). As for Israel, he "repeatedly claimed its intent to 'wipe Israel off the map'", and "predicted [...] that Israel would not exist in 25 years" (Graham, S6547).

The argument put forward by supporters of the agreement replicated the core of the President's line of defence of the agreement: "This deal is not perfect and no one trusts Iran" (Johnson, S6570; Klobuchar, S6591; Warner, S6575). It is not a deal that "will resolve all of our differences with Iran" (The White House 2015a). Secretary of State, John Kerry, is quoted as saying: "We have no illusion that this behavior will change following implementation of the JCPOA" (quoted by

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Bennet, S6578; Franken, S6567). A central plank of the Democrats' argument is: "this deal is not built on trust; it is built on verification" (The White House 2015a; Carper, S6555).

Some of the most likely victims of the accord are close allies, such as Israel: critics pointed that the agreement will pave the way to a nuclear Iran, enhancing Iran's regional power in ways that will endanger Israeli security (Mimi Walters, H5898). A major line of argument by the opposition is that the "the deal poses an existential threat to Israel" (Peters, S6556); the deal is "a death sentence for Israel" (Graham, S6549; Clyburn, H5895).

JCPOA opponents rendered a harsh verdict on the Obama administration's performance, alleging "officials proved to be weak negotiators because of an absolute desperation for a deal — almost any deal" (Hatch, S6546; Graham, S6548; Grassley, S6562; Chabot, H5899). President Obama is "absolutely the poorest champion of freedom and the weakest opponent of evil in history. Evil is flourishing on his watch" (Graham, S6548). Coats berates the false argument used by Democrats that the agreement is the only option to war, by masking "a far more valid argument that this deal makes future war far more likely, not less" (Coats, S6559).

The Plot

Critics blast the JCPOA for transforming Iran, from the most sanctioned country in the world, into a legitimate nuclear actor. The agreement allegedly legitimises Iran's formerly illegal nuclear programme, leaving Iran as a threshold nuclear power, and "rewarding years of deception, deceit, and wanton disregard for international law" (Johnson, S6570; Thune, S6663; Cotton, S6675; Franks, H5972; Barasso, S6549; Grassley, S6561-S6562; Johnson, S6570; Capito, S6586; Sullivan, S6590). Democrats flip the argument on its head affirming that the problem is that, as it stands, Iran is already a nuclear threshold state (Durbin, S6581; DeFazio, H5874).

According to JCPOA detractors, the original flaw in the agreement is that it allows Iran to keep enriching uranium, which was a previous non-negotiable red line (Smith, H5894; Cotton, S6579; Grassley, S6561; Cotton, S6675). When the various restrictions imposed on Iran's nuclear programme expire, it will be provided with a pathway to acquiring nuclear weapons (Hatch, S6546; Fitzpatrick, H5872).

A crucial line of Republican argumentation against the deal is that the administration failed to make good on assurances that negotiations would include the condition "anytime, anywhere" short-notice inspections (Mimi Walters, H5898; Black, H5959). Tehran can stall inspections of nuclear sites, including restrict immediate access to Iran's military facilities, by international weapons inspectors (Fizpatrick, H5872; Hatch, S6546; Thune, S6663-6664; Crapo, S6687). Furthermore, critics highlight that the so-called snapback mechanism, which "involves an incredibly cumbersome process" (Hatch, S6546; Schumer, S6552).

A historical parallel is drawn with the 1994 nuclear agreement with North Korea, a "déjà vu" (Coats, S6560; Rubio, S6581; Royce, H5907; Coats, S6560; Royce, H5908; Cotton, S6579). Another analogy, used by those opposed to the deal, is the "disastrous history of the Munich

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Agreement" (Graham, S6547; McClintock, H5876). The comparison suggests that the enemy is deceptive, and that peacemakers are naïve (Cotton ,S6579; Wicker, S6624; Williams, H5874).

The deal invited a barrage of attacks because it is focused exclusively on the nuclear issue, not embedding the JCPOA in a consistent regional strategy that meets the broader challenge posed by Iran in the Middle East, including the nonnuclear elements of the agreement. One such element regards the fact that Iran might take advantage of the lifting of the UN 5-year arms embargo to purchase sophisticated weapon systems (Hatch, S6546). Another major point of criticism is that the ballistic missile embargo ends after 8 years (Grassley, S6561). Detractors argued that in exchange for the limited temporary constraints accepted, the Iranian regime "stands to reap enormous rewards in sanctions relief" (Hatch, S6546). Iranian "[…] hardliners could use these funds to pursue an ICBM as soon as sanctions are lifted, and then augment their ICBM capabilities in 8 years after the ban on importing ballistic weaponry is lifted" (Schumer, S6552; Royce, H5909).

A critical contention point of Republican criticism is the agreement's failure to address Tehran's destabilising influence in the region (Schumer, S6553). Iranians "will target us and raise the price of our presence in the Middle East until they hope to completely pull us out of that region" (Rubio, S6580).

Detractors of the agreement say the Obama administration gave away the advantages accrued from robust multilateral sanctions patiently built with international support (Coats, S6559; Enzi, S6596; Gardner, S6577; Murkowsky, S6595).

Some Republicans alleged the administration manipulated and distorted the debate to "force this agreement on us by arguing that it is a choice between this deal and war" (Coats, S6559); "this false choice is among the most infamous, cynical, and blatantly false manipulations the Obama administration has used to distort this important debate, and they ought to be ashamed of themselves for using this tactic" (Coats, S6559).

Advocates of the deal responded using a trump card: they argued that those who pledged for the war in Iraq were now making the case against the Iran nuclear deal (Franken, S6567). Opponents of JCPOA are "the same neocons who stampeded the United States into war with Iraq" (Schakowsky, H5896-5897; McCollum, H5899; DeFazio, H5874).

Finally, a major point of criticism is the right to enrich at all, which, Republicans allege, the administration conceded to Iran, in terms of spurring a potential arms race in an already dangerous region (Cotton, S6579; McClintock, H5876).

The Moral

For Democrats, the deal epitomises the benefits of cooperation with the international community: "The path of violence and rigid ideology, a foreign policy based on threats to attack your neighbors or eradicate Israel — that's a dead end" (The White House 2015a). Labelling the "hard negotiations" that led to the nuclear deal as "a powerful display of American leadership and diplomacy" (Saenz

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

2015), Obama said the results had demonstrated to the world what his engagement-over-belligerence approach could accomplish. The agreement allegedly is a vindication of Obama's foreign policy trademark: faith in diplomacy over the use of force (The White House 2015b).

For Republicans the bottom line is that Tehran's long record of cheating, evading and concealing its activities from UN inspectors renders any agreement worthless. Critics argued that the "sunset provisions", which stipulate when the various restrictions imposed on Iran's nuclear programme expire, provide Iran with a patient pathway to developing nuclear weapons. They say lifting sanctions will make Iran an economic powerhouse, will bolster its ability to destabilise the Middle East and cause mischief.

The Rhetorical Mode Employed

The analysis above dissected policy arguments and narratives deployed in Obama's speeches and congressional debates, especially in the final days of the 60-day review period for Congress to vote to approve or disapprove the deal. I examined the variations in the rhetorical mode employed, disaggregating arguments, and, mostly, the narrative elements in the opposition camp.

It is to be noticed that the arguments against the agreement try to demonstrate its perceived flaws. Arguments are deployed in a mostly tit-for-tat fashion. What stands out more vividly in the pro-deal line of argumentation is the difficulty in responding to criticism of the deal as being faulty and flawed. Some Democrats concede the agreement is not perfect, and even express some frustration at its limited scope.

What also stands out from the analysis is that the narrative mode is predominantly used by the Republican opposition to the JCPOA. The Republican critique combines elements from different discourses, but is anchored in storytelling, while democrats rely on argument (or better, counter-argument), not on narrative. The Republican line of defense ranks high on narrative elements, especially in terms of characters and emplotment. Successful narratives build upon simple policy images, and convey a consistent message: the Republican narrative on Iran deploys several features of the "bad guy" character, because it has its historical basis in American perception of Tehran's role since the 1979 Islamic revolution and the 1979-1980 hostage crisis. This depiction is in line with the American discourse "which has a historical basis in American perception of villainous foreign enemies, and the demonization of Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution and the hostage crisis" (Biswas 2018, 342; Pillar 2013; Ferrero 2013). There is, according to Republicans, a history of deception from a duplicitous and untrustworthy Iranian regime. Iranian efforts to develop nuclear weapons are depicted as suspect.

Their view is that Iran's leaders are so fundamentally aggressive and untrustworthy that they almost certainly negotiated in bad faith, and will exploit any deal to tap into any avenues to further their nuclear programme. They also point out that the Iranian regime is committed "to wiping Israel off the map" (Benjamin and Simon 2019). They detail Iranian's aggressive and destabilising

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

activity in the Middle East, financing of terrorism, and development of intercontinental ballistic missiles. The narrative portrays Iran as the foremost state sponsor of terrorism, attempting to expand its influence across the Middle East through its pawns, while pursuing nuclear weapons – an argument many Democrats concede to (Clinton 2014, 348). As underlined by Biswas, "the current relationship between the US or the West and Iran described in grand Huntingtonian terms — where the conflict appears civilizational and its roots primordial" (Biswas 2018, 335). Interestingly, and contrary to other studies of policy narratives, the "villain" character, not the "hero", is the primary driver of narrative persuasion (McBeth et al. 2014).

The argumentation deployed by Democrats vindicating the agreement is both instrumental and normative. The normative argumentation is mostly present in President Obama's speeches, especially when referring to the values that undergird his approach, such as his willingness to engage with America's long-time enemies and preference for "painstaking diplomacy" over "a mindset that put[s] a premium on unilateral U.S. action" (The White House 2015a). That approach showcases positive cosmopolitan principles of multilateralism and negotiated agreements.

The Right Rhetorical Mode for the Right Time?

Krebs's model on the dynamics of contestation of the dominant narrative posits that policy change is more likely when times are unsettled, and elites and the public are in need of a narrative that provides a sense of order and stability. Critically, unsettled times give leaders the opportunity to recast the dominant narrative by using persuasive storytelling. In the opposite scenario, if the narrative situation is relatively settled, it will be difficult to change the dominant narrative. In that case, challenging the narrative is possible, but the public debate is constrained, as proposed alternatives must be "legitimated within the terms of the prevailing narrative" (Krebs 2015b, 42-43).

In US policy, when narratives are relatively settled, the rhetorical space for actors who intend to depart from the dominant narrative is limited. In the case of the Iran nuclear deal, one can consider that partisan divide over the nuclear agreement was wide, but that, strictly speaking, it was not an unsettled time: one of internal instability, political party change, ruling elites and state responses to perceived threats challenging key tenets of the dominant narrative (Krebs 2015b, 6).

Apropos of the perceived need to change Iran's extant policy, a few points are worth noting. Arguably, the ineffectiveness of sanctions to obtain Iran's cooperation was not seen as a sufficient condition to change US policy. In effect, the ever-increasing economic pressure put in place after 2010, did not lead Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions. On the other hand, Republicans argued that sanctions had crippled the regime (Coats, S6559) and had played a critical role in bringing the Iranian regime to the negotiating table (Daines, S6551; Grassley, S6561). The problem in altering the policy was because of the divisiveness of the issue, and the deep bipartisan divide. It was also due to the opposition by political constituency, hampering the exploration of opportunities for US-Iranian cooperation (Parsi 2017, 271). Changing the US-Iran relationship paradigm was difficult

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

because of the "domestic political minefield" surrounding the issue (Parsi 2017, 271), that is, the prevalence of "domestic games" and "ideology" (Kaussler and Hastedt 2017, 169). In fact, in the background, the opposition came not only from Republicans, traditionally pro-Israel: there was a stark divide on the Iran agreement within the Democratic Party itself. Some Senate Democrats declared their opposition to the Iran deal, while others were undecided. The rejection of the Iran deal by key Democrat Senator, Chuck Schumer – the number three Senate Democrat, and the most influential Jewish lawmaker in Congress –, in early August (Schumer 2015), created a major hurdle for the President to get it through Congress. The lobbying fight over the Iran nuclear deal eventually centred on Democrats.

Between July and early September, and ahead of the vote on a resolution of disapproval by September 17, the White House and a wide network of campaigners, engaged in a sustained effort to sell the Iran deal to Congress, and to move public opinion to its side (Parsi 2017, 291; Doran 2016; Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015; Rhodes 2018, 327). Those administration staff members created what Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor for strategic communications, called an "echo chamber" (Samuels 2016). Rhodes, who strategised and ran the successful Iran-deal messaging campaign, offered a "narrative" to the media to sell the Iran deal (Samuels 2016; Rhodes 2018, 252).

An orchestrated lobbying effort was deployed to combat the counter-narrative, which was called "war of the lobbies" (Seliktar and Rezaei 2018, 169; Parsi 2017, 331). J Street, a pro-Israel group that supported the deal, undertook its own $5 million advertising campaign resorting to former military officials and diplomats to Capitol Hill as part of a lobbying effort, especially to assuage Democrat lawmakers' concerns that they would not be punished by Jewish voters and donors for supporting the agreement (Davis 2015).

During congressional recess in August, the President contacted many lawmakers to persuade Democrats who were hesitant about the agreement to vote against a Republican bid to block it (Davis 2015). White House aides, Senate minority whip, Democrat Dick Durbin, and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, worked closely with the White House to guarantee the remaining votes to get 41 Democrats needed to block a vote in the Senate. Many Congressional Democrats were invited to the White House to discuss the deal with members of the administration. The administration pushed hard on Democrats who were on the fence to run-up the vote in September. For some Democrats, it was a difficult decision, putting them at odds with constituents who feared for Israel's security, as well as in the way of a sharp backlash from pro-Israel voters. Other governments involved in the negotiations had expressed their own wariness, concerned that a deal preserved only by a sustained veto might represent too fickle of a commitment (Dovere and Everett 2015).

By September 8, all senators had made a commitment on the agreement, with 42[4] in support (40 Democrats, plus 2 independents), and 58 against (54 Republicans, plus 4 Democrats).

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[4] On September 10, Senate Democrats filibustered a procedural vote to register formal disapproval of JCPOA. The Senate voted 58-42, short of a required 60-vote threshold. As a result, the agreement went into effect after the congressional review period.

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

Ultimately, four Democratic senators voted against the President, joining 19 other Democrats in the House who said they were opposed to the deal. The outcome of the vote allowed Obama to claim there wasn't enough actual opposition to the nuclear agreement to even vote a resolution of disapproval by September 16 (Kiefer 2015).

One can argue that the puzzling aspect is that Obama managed to get a deal despite the tremendous opposition it faced. The administration certainly argued its case in a logical and a factual manner. Obama addressed the arguments in opposition to this deal, tackling critiques head on, demonstrating that "none of them stand up to scrutiny" (The White House 2015a). He pleaded for the agreement with conviction, but also with a logical reasoning its critics and Congress had to engage with. That is why he stuck to a tight argument, and to rhetorical coercion. In regard to his tight argumentation, the administration stuck to a basic defensive line summarised in the leitmotiv consistently reiterated by Democrats: "this is not a deal built on trust, but rather on verification" (The White House 2015b; Bonamici, H1260; Kerry quoted by Bennet, S6578). Advocates of the deal reckoned they had no illusions about the Iranian regime: that is why the deal rested on a robust inspection and monitoring regime that could respond promptly to evidence of Iranian cheating (Franken, S6567; Obama quoted in Friedman 2015). Seeking to sell the Iran nuclear deal to sceptical US lawmakers, Obama used a more aggressive, unusually blunt argument: "Let's not mince words: The choice we face is ultimately between diplomacy and some form of war—maybe not tomorrow, maybe not three months from now, but soon. How can we in good conscience justify war before we've tested a diplomatic agreement that achieves our objectives?" (The White House 2015a). The administration insisted that the agreement was the only alternative to a nuclear arms race, and to more war in the Middle East. It was a simple, though controversial contention, but it effectively closed off "routes of acceptable rebuttal" (Krebs and Jackson 2007, 44-45).

Thus, the main line put forward by the administration was that the agreement limiting Iran's nuclear capability offered the only path – short of military action. In fact, Obama presented the deal as a stark choice, saying there was no alternative to the deal other than war: "Either it's resolved diplomatically through negotiations or it's resolved through force. Through war. Those are the options" (DeYoung 2015). He insisted the world would risk "even more war in the Middle East" without the nuclear agreement with Iran (DeYoung 2015). Lawmakers who opposed the deal said they were not persuaded, and some said they resented the President's tone to counter the opposition. Obama charged his detractors of failing to present an alternative to the deal. Having been the object of acrimonious partisan criticisms, the President countered opponents of the Iran agreement by hinting that they were warmongers, acting out of unflagging partisanship (Singh 2016, 49). He compared Republicans to Iranian hardliners who chanted "Death to America", in what may have been interpreted as an accusation of colluding with the enemy.

Obama also used the same "with-me-or-against-me" dichotomy associated with George W. Bush's launch of his anti-terrorism campaign. This ultimatum speech act played on the public fears reminiscent of the US's road to war against Iraq. He framed the September 2015 vote in Congress – to approve or reject the deal – as the most consequential foreign policy decision for

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

lawmakers, since Congress voted in 2003 to authorise the military intervention against Iraq (De Luce and Hudson 2015). This framing of the choice as one between war and peace antagonised many congressmen, and created a stark dilemma for lawmakers, including many in his own party who had concerns about the agreement (Chang 2015).

Conclusion

This study argues that narratives are central to public persuasion, but they must be aligned with the political moment, in order to leverage a new foreign policy narrative. Skilled political and rhetorical manoeuvring allowed President Obama to skirt Congressional opposition to the nuclear deal in the late summer of 2015. The Obama administration relied on an argumentative strategy, as opposed to a Republican well-rounded narrative that explained why Iran intended to dupe the US and benefit from sanctions relief.

In line with Krebs's work, I analysed the narrative employed by advocates and opponents of the agreement. In a settled context – as was the case –, typically, there is not much space to challenge a dominant narrative. When there is a relatively dominant and stable national-security narrative, political contestation, no matter how vigorous, is usually constrained. In the case of the JCPOA, an additional difficulty was overcoming a long-standing narrative on Iran's security challenge to the US. By employing an argumentative approach, the administration was able to resort to a narrative strategy that coerced the opponents into a corner, compelling them to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject. In actuality, the persuasive efforts eventually came to be centred on the Democrats, underscoring how controversial the accord was within the president's own party. He was able to sway Democrats due two major issues: the substance of the deal, and the political consequences of rejecting it. On the substance issue, Obama's main argument was that blocking the deal carried serious risks that could lead to an armed conflict with Tehran down the road. The other major consequence would be that nations that worked together on the Iran nuclear deal said they were unwilling to return to the negotiating table. Many Democrats eventually came around reluctantly, in the wake of an intense lobbying campaign by the administration, and an unusually punctilious examination of the issues involved in the agreement. Obama was not successful in establishing a new narrative, but was able to narrow the scope for alternatives, depriving the opposition and Democratic recalcitrants of a response to the main argument: that the choice boiled down to the Iran nuclear deal or war.

Acknowledgements

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(1): e007, 2021

Pinto Arena ▶

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