

Conspiracy and Foreign Policy

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Conspiracies play a significant role in world politics. States often engage in covert operations. They plot in secret, with and against each other. At the same time, conspiracies are often associated with irrational thinking and delusion. We address this puzzle and highlight the need to see conspiracies as more than just empirical phenomena.

We argue that claims about conspiracies should be seen as narratives that are intrinsically linked to power relations and the production of foreign policy knowledge. We illustrate the links between conspiracies, legitimacy and power by examining multiple conspiracies associated with 9/11 and the War on Terror. Two trends are visible. On the one hand, US officials identified a range of conspiracies and presented them as legitimate and rational, even though some, such as the alleged covert development of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, are now widely considered false. On the other hand, conspiracies circulating in the Arab-Muslim world were dismissed as irrational and pathological, even though some, like those concerned with the covert operation of US power in the Middle East, were based on credible concerns.

Introduction

Conspiracies are common in world politics. Terrorist plots unfold on a weekly basis. Intelligence agencies operate covert programmes of surveillance, sabotage and disinformation on a global scale. States scheme against each other in the national interest. At the same time, conspiracies are often associated with irrational thinking. Allegations about the secret operation of international political power are regularly thought of as paranoid. Of all the ways an idea can be discredited, labelling it a 'conspiracy' ranks amongst the most effective. A number of questions inevitably ensue: Which conspiracies are real and which are paranoid? Who decides?

The purpose of this article is to engage this puzzle and to examine the role that conspiracy plays in world politics. We focus on United States (US) foreign policy discourse during the War on Terror, paying particular attention to the way US officials and foreign policy commentators represented claims about conspiracies. Numerous conspiracies were at play after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. How did 9/11 happen? Who was responsible for planning and executing the attack? The answers to these questions inevitably lead to secret plots and conspiratorial politics. Here we find terrorist organizations, like Al-Qaeda, operating in secret, infiltrating countries and working on ever-new terrorist attacks. Then we

have the subterranean world of CIA operations and all the secret links to legitimate and at times not-so-legitimate actors in the Middle East. Some even go as far as to claim that the CIA itself was secretly involved in the attacks of 9/11. All this is not surprising, for, as Guy Debord (2002) stresses, every major political event inevitably becomes associated with secrecy and competing attempts to explain the seemingly inexplicable. But how are we to make sense of the numerous parallel conspiracies that surround 9/11 and the War on Terror?

We argue that the links between conspiracy and foreign policy can best be understood if we move beyond the conventional understanding of conspiracy as a secret plan drawn up 'by a group to do something unlawful or harmful' (Oxford Dictionary Online, 2016). In addition to viewing conspiracy as an act, we should also see perceptions of conspiracies as narratives that are intrinsically linked to power relations and the production of foreign policy knowledge. To argue this is not to suggest that there is no place for approaches that aim to distinguish between claims about conspiracy that have substance and those that do not. However, as we show, there remain serious questions about the power dynamics involved in making such judgments, along with other issues around the relationship between evidence and interpretation.¹

Understanding claims about conspiracies in terms of narrative allows us to situate them as part of power relations that legitimize and delegitimize. Indeed, we suggest that the legitimacy of a conspiracy narrative is most closely related to the political position of the actor advancing it.

Such an account is clearly linked to broader conceptions of security as a 'speech act' performed by powerful actors in specific political landscapes (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2010; Hansen, 2011). Likewise, it resonates with accounts of security that focus on the production of identity and difference, as well as the intersubjective and relational dynamics of world politics (Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989; Campbell, 1992; Burke, 2005; Jackson, 2005, 2007; Jarvis, 2009; Holland, 2013; Duncombe, 2015). Both literatures emphasize the extent to which discourse and context shape the way threats emerge and are understood. In doing so, they also draw attention to the power relations implicated in the production of knowledge about world politics. We recast the perception of conspiracy on these grounds and situate it as an important, though under-theorized aspect of the contemporary security environment.

We suggest that studying the competing conspiracy narratives that spring up around issues of international political controversy like 9/11 is a particularly useful way of understanding how foreign policy knowledge is produced. This is important because such knowledge is often the basis for foreign policy decision-making, including on matters of war and peace.

We begin by outlining the historical pervasiveness of conspiracies in world politics. We then identify and assess three ways the perception of conspiracies has been understood: as the delusions of irrational individuals or groups; as phenomena that are much more central to societal dynamics than is usually held; and as narratives that are legitimized and delegitimized in particular political contexts. All three approaches are useful. The first two have been fairly widely applied, but the approach we highlight has not been well developed in the foreign policy literature.

We examine the issues at stake in the context of competing conspiracy narratives that were

evident in the representations of US officials and foreign policy commentators after 9/11. We show that within this interpretive community some conspiracy narratives were taken for granted as normal political claims, while other conspiracy narratives were dismissed as irrational and paranoid.

On the one hand there are conventional narratives about 9/11 around which a foreign policy consensus was established. It was broadly accepted that the terrorist attack was the result of a secret plot by the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda. Yet we show that this view also leaves out a series of equally compelling positions that implicate the USA in the politics that lead up to 9/11. It is now widely understood, for instance, that Al-Qaeda was established as part of the covert war against the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in the late 1980s, which was organized and funded by the CIA and implemented by Pakistani Intelligence (Bergen and Reynolds, 2005).

We highlight how prominent views of 9/11 amongst US officials and foreign policy commentators isolated certain conspiracies and presented them as legitimate and rational. And we show that this was achieved even though some of the conspiracies identified, such as those about the covert production of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, were later found to be misleading (Chilcot, 2016).

On the other hand, we show how conspiracy narratives purportedly espoused in the Middle East were written off by US officials and foreign policy commentators. Several surveys conducted in the wake of 9/11 indicated that significant proportions of the population in Arab-Muslim countries did not believe that Al-Qaeda had carried out the attack. According to widespread US media reportage, numerous alternative explanations circulated, including some that saw the USA as secretly involved. Prominent US policy commentators associated these positions with anti-Americanism and an allegedly widespread tendency in the Middle East to hold paranoid conspiracy theories about the role of US foreign policy. The process of depicting the entire Middle East as riven with a paranoid mind-set has broad implications. Many positions identified with Arab-Muslims were dismissed as irrational and pathological, even though some of them, such as concerns about covert US actions or the geopolitical motives of US strategy in the Middle East, were based on credible concerns.

Before we proceed, a short note on definition is in order. We use the terms conspiracies and conspiracy theories throughout the essay. Conventionally the former refers to empirical phenomena, as outlined in the Oxford Dictionary (2016) conception above, whereas the latter is inevitably associated with far-fetched ideas about such phenomena. But we consciously avoid such a stark divide, in part because scholars have not been able to agree on definitions (see Keeley, 1999; and DeHaven-Smith, 2013: 36-41), in part because our main aim is not to settle these definitional disputes but to explore how narratives about conspiracies function politically.

Source

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