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International bureaucrats in the UN Security Council debates: A speaker-topic network analysis

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ABSTRACT


Intergovernmental deliberations in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are typically considered the realm of sovereign nation states. We challenge this position by studying the role of the UN Secretariat in UNSC debates, focusing on the debates on Afghanistan (1995–2017). We combine natural language processing with a network theoretical perspective to observe *speaker position*, *topic introduction*, and *topic evolution* and we complement this analysis with an illustrative case study. The quantitative analysis shows that UN officials take an overall impartial position but that they do, at times, introduce and promote their own topics putting them in the position to shape the debate. The qualitative case study selects one ‘bureaucratic topic’ to confirm bureaucratic agency. Combined, our methods allow to study the role of speakers in a debate and show that the UN bureaucracy acted as an autonomous speechmaker even in a venue where bureaucratic agency seems unlikely – the UNSC.

KEYWORDS Natural language processing; Speaker-topic network; Topic modelling; International public administration; Afghanistan

Introduction

The academic literature increasingly recognizes the independent agency of international public administrations in international affairs (Bauer et al., 2017; Eckhard & Ege, 2016; Jankauskas, 2021; Littoz-Monnet, 2021; Patz & Goetz, 2019; Thorvaldsdottir et al., 2021). However, such influence is portrayed as largely informal, happening ‘behind the scenes’ (Dijkstra, 2015; Ege et al., 2021; Jörgens et al., 2016, p. 979) or as part of the depoliticized and technocratic realm (Louis & Maertens, 2021) where IO bureaucracies

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use their expertise (Busch et al., 2021) and silent diplomacy to shape global governance (Finnemore, 2021). By contrast, little is known about the actions and impact of international officials when they appear on the public stage, that is, when they deliver statements in public debates of IO decision-making forums. In this paper, we ask about the role of the UN Secretariat in the debates of one of the world's most exclusive political clubs – the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – and how we can study speakers' discursive contributions in large speech corpora.

Conceptually, we develop a novel approach that combines measures of *speaker position*, *topic introduction*, and *topic evolution* in speech corpora drawing on Structural Topic Modeling (Roberts et al., 2014) and network analysis (following Lee et al. (2016)). Moreover, we supplement these measures with an illustrative case study. The first allows us to visualize and study (changes in) a speaker's role in a debate. The latter allows us to show that the UN bureaucracy can, in fact, act as an autonomous speechmaker.

Empirically, our findings are based on the UN Security Council Debates corpus with 65,393 UNSC speeches between 1995 and 2017 (Schönfeld et al., 2019).¹ We focus on the UNSC debates on 'The Situation in Afghanistan'. This sub-corpus includes 2,655 speeches delivered throughout 155 meetings between 1996 and 2017. As an area of high politics for key UNSC member states – as also illustrated by recent events – the debates on Afghanistan provide a hard test for theory on bureaucratic agency in international organizations.

Through the quantitative corpus analysis, we find that the UN Secretariat generally took a position of impartiality by equally addressing topics highlighted by all UNSC member states. However, we also observe three distinct instances of topic introduction by the UN Secretariat – out of 13 topics in total – for the topics 'security and reform' (in 2000), 'elections' (in 2004), and 'economic development' (in 2006), which reached varying levels of centrality over time. The supplementary qualitative case study of the topic 'security and reform' then finds that topic introduction by UN speakers can represent instances of autonomous speechmaking. We show that officials tabled the controversial policy option of expanding the presence of international troops beyond Kabul and successfully promoted this option until it received sufficient attention and support.

Overall, the quantitative methods and procedures laid-out in this paper allow to visualize and describe the (changing) role and position of speakers in a debate. Valuable and instructive, the inferences are descriptive and conclusions about discursive or policy impact would be subject to case-by-case triangulation. In this paper, the qualitative case study of a topic introduced by UN officials shows that UN bureaucracy interventions *can* set the UNSC agenda on new topics, define the initial boundaries of a discussion, and have a substantive impact on a UNSC debate. However, generalization of

this correlation between quantitative finding (topic introduction and promotion) and qualitative finding (autonomous speechmaking) would be subject to studying the entire corpus of UNSC debates. While we focus on the UNSC, the conceptual framework developed here can be used to study other speech corpora as well (e.g., Baturu et al., 2017; Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2021; Rauh, 2021). Theoretically, our findings suggest that the agency of international bureaucrats extends beyond non-public forums and includes public arenas of high politics.

In the following, we theorize the political rationale for speechmaking in IO governing boards and intergovernmental forums, develop the framework for studying speaker-topic networks in debate corpora and outline the data processing, topic-modelling, and the construction of the annual speaker-topic networks. After presenting our quantitative and qualitative findings, we offer a discussion and conclusion.

Speechmaking in the UN Security Council: states and UN bureaucrats

The UN Security Council is one of the best-studied intergovernmental bodies (Lowe et al., 2010; Sievers & Daws, 2014). Although most UNSC business is done behind the scenes, meetings with public speeches made up more than 60 per cent of all meetings in recent years.² While UNSC votes and vetoes have long been in academic focus (notably following Kuziemko & Werker, 2006), public speeches have become a key source for studying global discourses on topics as diverse as 'Women, Peace and Security' (Tryggestad, 2018), the 'Responsibility to Protect' (Bellamy & Williams, 2011), and the roles of China and the United States (Thompson, 2015). Some UNSC speeches, like Colin Powell's speech to justify the Iraq War in 2003, even entered collective memory.

However, after 8,778 public UNSC meetings between January 1946 and December 2020 with over 100,000 speeches, we still know relatively little about the practice of speech-making in the UNSC. Some argue that 'the Security Council meets in public only to adopt resolutions already agreed upon in informal meetings, without giving any insight into the motives underpinning its decisions' (de Wet, 2004, p. 109). For others, the UNSC is just 'a talking shop', with 'a great deal of speechifying and grandstanding, much of it vacuous' (Weiss et al., 2018, p. xvi). And yet, ambassadors and sometimes even prime ministers spend hours preparing and reading 'lengthy and carefully crafted public speeches' (Thompson, 2006, p. 29). Hence, for them, speeches in the UNSC matter.

For states, crafting these public speeches is a way of signaling their positions and creating demand for joint action – for instance by flagging human rights violations (Sievers & Daws, 2014, p. 4). Even if positions are

known, UNSC speeches serve the purpose of ‘strategic information transmission’ (Thompson, 2006, p. 3). And while speeches are usually pre-written, limiting the actual debates in the room, speechmaking in the UNSC is still deliberative when we consider sequences of meetings (Johnstone, 2011, p. 302; cf. Moeckli & Fasel, 2017). Thus, the words and topics actors choose to voice and signal their position in UNSC are not random; they are carefully selected with the purpose to affect the audience(s).

So far, most attention to speechmaking in the UNSC was directed at states. When the role of UN officials in these debates is discussed, the absence of words is more noticed than their presence. For instance, the Secretariat’s failure to deliver a report by the UN mission in Rwanda to the Security Council is considered part of the reason the UNSC failed to prevent the genocide of 1994 (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, p. 140ff.).

Nevertheless, UN Secretary-Generals frequently make use of their right to ‘bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security’ (Article 99 UN Charter, see also Sievers & Daws, 2014, p. 170). Based on Article 99 of the UN Charter, the Secretary-General can also delegate her speechmaking right to other officials (Sievers & Daws, 2014, p. 164), for example her Special Representatives. And UN officials speak as frequently as Permanent Five (P5) members in public UNSC meetings. Moreover, in speaking at the Council, the Secretariat is asked to present its own judgments and priorities:

The members of the Security Council encourage members of the Secretariat to *focus on key issues* and to *provide the latest information*, as necessary, without repeating the content of written reports already available to members of the Council. (S/2010/507, p. 5, emphasis added)

We thus expect that speeches held by bureaucrats are more than simple acts of information transmission. UN officials are requested to make decisions about what ‘key issues’ are when drafting their interventions. They must choose their own words when speaking, and they can decide to bring particular topics to the attention of the UNSC. The words used and the topics they do (not) address are therefore as deliberate and strategic as when states craft their speeches. By so doing, bureaucrats are able to (co-)shape what is considered relevant, how particular problems are understood, and, ultimately, what solutions are under consideration.

Speaker-topic networks: observing speaker position, topic introduction, and topic evolution

To observe the role of UN officials in the UNSC debates on Afghanistan we look at three central indicators – *speaker position*, *topic introduction*, and *topic evolution* – in annual speaker-topic networks derived from the speech

corpus studied. We adapt the procedure introduced by Lee et al. (2016) and combine unsupervised Structural Topic Modeling of speeches with speaker and speech metadata included in the corpus. While the methodological process is described in section 4 and the online annexes, in this section we focus on the conceptual challenge to observe a speaker’s role in a debate in temporally stacked speaker-topic networks.

Conceptually, speaker-topic networks constitute a class of socio-semantic networks (Roth & Cointet, 2010; Saint-Charles & Mongeau, 2018). They are bipartite, two-mode networks with two types of nodes – speakers and topics – and are conceptually similar to discourse networks (Leifeld & Haunss, 2012). A tie (or edge) is present between a speaker S_n and a topic T_n when S_n chooses words that define T_n . What defines a topic depends on the conceptual-methodological approach chosen: Topics can be predefined by experts (e.g., in a topic dictionary) or can be extracted through supervised or unsupervised topic modeling. The strength of a tie between a speaker and a topic represents – depending on the question or method – the frequency, intensity or clarity with which S_n addresses T_n in one or more of her speeches.

An actor’s role in a debate can subsequently be observed in a speaker-topic network by studying the evolution of *speaker centrality* and of *topic centrality*, and by looking at *topic introduction* (see Table 1). Most of the traditional centrality measures (Freeman, 1979) can be applied to two-mode networks, but they require careful attention when interpreted (Bonacich, 1991). To study the importance of nodes in two-mode networks, eigenvector centrality and degree centrality are considered most appropriate (Griffin et al., 2016).

First, when studying speaker-topic networks, we suggest *eigenvector centrality* is most appropriate to assess the evolution of a *speaker’s position in relation to topics mentioned by other speakers*. Eigenvector centrality is ‘a weighted degree measure in which the centrality of a node is proportional to the sum of centralities of the nodes it is adjacent to’ (Borgatti & Everett, 1997, p. 257). In speaker-topic networks, a speaker’s position is thus defined by whether she speaks about topics that are important to other

Table 1. Observational dimensions for the role of a speaker in a debate.

Dimension	Speaker-topic network observation	Interpretation for bureaucratic speakers
Speaker position	(Changes in) eigenvector centrality of speaker node	High centrality indicates speaker impartiality; low centrality one-sidedness or focus on distinct topics
Topic introduction	Speaker node with exclusive or strongest tie to a topic when it first appears	Speaker introduces new topic to debate
Topic evolution	Changes in degree centrality of topic nodes	Topic gains/losses in salience when more/less speakers speak (more/less intensively) about it

(key) speakers. More eigenvector central actors speak about many topics that are important to all other speakers, less eigenvector central speakers focus on unique or marginal topics. For speakers of the UN Secretariat, high eigenvector centrality implies impartiality considering they need to address all topics of importance to the member states to reach this position.

Second, an actor – independent of her centrality – may bring new issues to the table: *Topic introduction*. Through topic introduction, a speaker has an immediate impact on a debate. Regardless of whether the topic resonates, both the participants and audience to the debate will learn about this new topic. Moreover, topic introduction gives a speaker the advantage of being able to frame the issue, set the initial perimeters, and offer a first definition of the introduced event, problem, or policy. However, only topics that are taken up by other speakers will have a more lasting, substantive impact on the debate.

Third, a topic's importance is defined by its *degree centrality* in the speaker-topic network. A topic T_n is more degree central when more speakers talk about this topic (more intensively) than about topic T_m . As with the eigenvector centrality of a speaker, a topic's centrality can change over time. This, we define as *topic evolution*. Topics may become salient, remain marginalized, or disappear depending on the intensity with which the topic is addressed and by how many speakers it is addressed.

Combined, these measures allow us to say something about the role and position of a speaker in a debate. Moreover, and intuitively, instances of successful topic introduction – when a speaker introduces a topic that gains in degree centrality over time – are most likely instances of speaker impact on a debate. To verify such impact, we select and study substantively a topic introduced by the UN bureaucracy that resonated and became salient over time.

From corpus to speaker-topic networks: the UNSC debates on Afghanistan

In this section, we present the methodological steps to transform a speech corpus into a series of speaker-topic networks (based on Lee et al., 2016). The analysis is restricted to a single but long-term UNSC agenda item – the 'Situation in Afghanistan'. We selected this sub-corpus for two reasons. First, focusing on a single issue sub-corpus allows us to increase the transparency and validity of the analysis.³ We also considered stochastic models for the analysis of network panel data that could have enabled studying the full corpus while controlling for potential confounders (Leifeld & Cranmer, 2019), but this approach would prevent a meaningful manual verification (see Appendix 1 for the assessment of the topic modeling validity). Second, the UNSC debates on Afghanistan represent a least-likely case (Gerring,

2007) for independent IO agency: UNSC debates in general form a least-likely case for bureaucratic agency, given the Council's importance in international affairs and the primacy of states in questions of peace and war. Moreover, the situation in Afghanistan became high politics for the US and other UNSC members after 9/11. This made a substantive impact of UN officials in the debates even less likely. Senior UN officials argued until late 2001 that they saw no important role for the UN administration in Afghanistan: '[T]he UN is not seeking a transitional administration [role] or peacekeeping or anything like that' (UN News, 17 October 2001).

Topic modelling of UNSC speeches on Afghanistan

We extracted a sub-corpus from the 'UN Security Council Debates' speech corpus (Schönfeld et al., 2019). This sub-corpus includes all transcripts of 155 Afghanistan-related meetings of the UNSC held between 1996 and 2017 (there were no meetings on Afghanistan in 1995). Each meeting protocol contains multiple speeches. The speeches were tokenized and all speeches with less than 80 tokens removed to filter out non-substantive speeches – usually the UNSC presidency announcing the next speaker. This reduced the sub-corpus from 2,655 to 1,600 substantive speeches by 113 unique speakers, including 188 speeches by UN officials (see Appendix 4). For each speech, the dataset contains automatically extracted and manually inspected metadata on speaker affiliation and speech dates.

Adapting the topic-modeling-to-bipartite-network pipeline by Lee et al. (2016) we use Structural Topic Modeling (STM) (Roberts et al., 2014) using the date of meetings as covariate to capture topics' changing prevalence. Drawing on measures for semantic coherence (Mimno et al., 2011) as well as exclusivity (Bischof & Airolidi, 2012) (see Appendix 1 for details), we selected $k = 13$ topics as numerically optimal and substantively valid representation. Figure 1 provides an overview of the temporal prevalence for all 13 topics as well as the author-provided labels (see Appendix 2 for full STM provided key words per topic). The evolution of the 13 topics over time captures the main events in Afghanistan and the strategic discussions in the UNSC. The impact of the US-led intervention event is clearly visible, with a marked shift in topics around 2001. Furthermore, topics like 'elections' (Topic 6) peak in key election years, which suggests that the topic model and the selection of k produce generally valid results so that the topics extracted are appropriate for the construction of annual speaker-topic networks.

Construction of the annual speaker-topic networks⁴

The basic output data of a topic model is a probability value that links each speech to each topic. Following Lee et al. (2016), we treat these probability

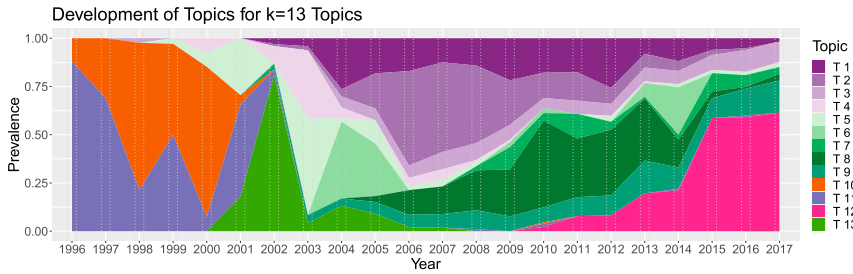


Figure 1. Topic prevalence (share of UNSC speeches on Afghanistan per dominant topic (T1-T13), 1996–2017).

Notes: Topic labels are 1 EU contribution, 2 Afghanistan compact/ reconstruction, 3 Taliban, terror, regional dimension, 4 Security and reform, 5 Drugs and sanctions, 6 Important elections, 7 Aid, economic development, 8 Transition of security, 9 Regional security, 10 Pre-2001 terrorist threat, 11 Pre-2001 conflict resolution, 12 Post-2014 transformation, 13 Bonn agreement/ Loya Jirga. Labels based on STM key words (full list in Appendix 2). Topic prevalence shows a clear shift of topics around the September 11th attacks. After 2005/06, topics shift more gradually in the absence of major sudden events. Prevalence of individual topics matches real political developments in Afghanistan. Some topics dominate in line with important one-off events such as Elections (topic 6) or the Bonn peace conference (topic 13). Others dominate for longer time periods such as the Afghan Compact (topic 8). There are also topics that prevail over extended periods, such as references to the war with the Taliban (topic 3) and the regional conflict dimension (topic 9). For further details and validation see Appendix 2.

values as tie strength of the edges between speakers and topics to construct a single speaker-topic network for each year from 1996 until 2017. These annual snapshots reflect the rhythm of the non-permanent UNSC membership which starts/ends at the turn of years. Speaker-topic network snapshots thus reflect a stable set of potential network members. Edge weights from speakers with multiple speeches per year are added up. The higher the weight of an edge between a speaker and a topic, the more clearly or intensively the speaker spoke about that topic in a given year.

Speaker-topic networks based on topic-modelling input tend to be near-complete because the algorithm will assign all speeches to all k topics with at least a very small probability. To reduce the density of the network and eliminate edges with very low probability values – and thus low validity –, we removed edges that did not pass the aggregated threshold of 5 per cent of the maximum edge weight in a given year from the network. For all years, we focused on the single core component of the speaker-topic network (i.e., with no isolated speakers or topics remaining).

Figure 2 visualizes two out of the 22 annual UNSC speaker-topic networks on Afghanistan used for this analysis. Central topics correspond to the most prevalent topics in each of those years (cf. Figure 1). For each of the 22 annual network snapshots, we calculated the speakers' eigenvector centrality and each topic's degree centrality. Since the number of speakers and topics differ between years, centrality values are normalized for comparability (for an extended discussion and more visualizations, see Appendix 3).

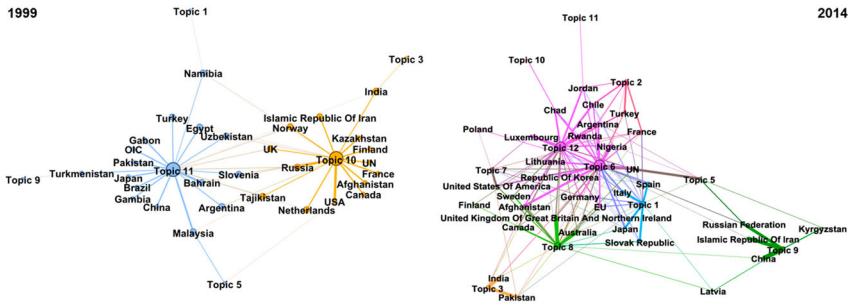


Figure 2. Network visualizations for 1999 and 2014 (created with Gephi).

Notes: Colors represent topic affiliations. Thickness of edges between speakers and topics represent the intensity or clarify with which speakers refer to a topic (measured through the aggregated probability value of speech to topic assignment). See Figure 1 for topic labels.

Findings: the role of the UN Secretariat in the UNSC debates on Afghanistan

Following the construction of the annual speaker-topic networks, we can observe the role of the UN bureaucracy in the UNSC debate on the situation in Afghanistan. Overall, we find that UN officials generally played a central and impartial role. But they were also in the position to introduce new topics into the debate. Some of these topics evolved to be central topics, suggesting substantive impact.

The UN bureaucracy's position in the speaker-topic network

UN officials spoke 118 times on the situation in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2017, similar to P5 speakers (China 116, France 117, UK 126, US 120)

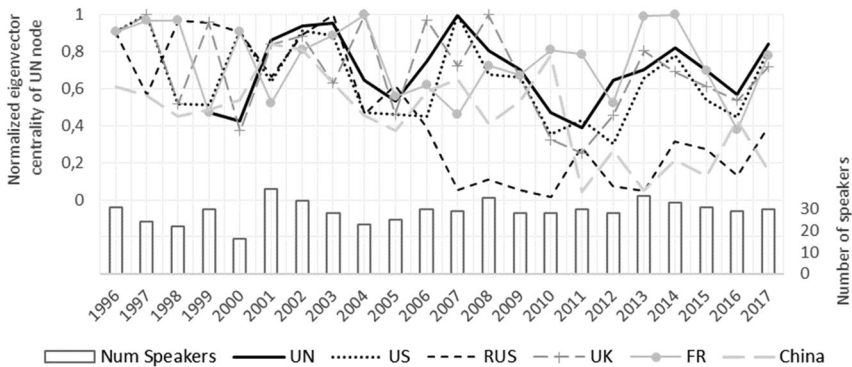


Figure 3. Normalized annual eigenvector centrality of UN and P5 speaker nodes 1996–2017.

Notes: Normalization calculated as $s(\text{norm}) = (s/s_{\text{max}})$, with s being the eigenvector centrality value of a speaker node in a year, and s_{max} the maximum centrality value in that year.

except Russia (195 speeches). **Figure 3** shows the UN's normalized eigenvector centrality in each annual speaker-topic network in relation to the centrality of P5 speakers. Eigenvector centrality of all six speakers remained high until around 2007, when Russia's centrality (and since 2011 also China's centrality) dropped sharply. This indicates that these two P5 members increasingly spoke about different and less central topics than the other UNSC speakers (including non-permanent members). While the UN Secretariat did not appear in the debates until 1999, after 1999 its eigenvector centrality increased rapidly until 2003 and remained high, with two minima in 2005 and 2011. The UN was thus among the most central speakers in the debate, despite an overall share of only 4.4 per cent of all speeches (see Appendix 4).

The increased participation of the UN bureaucracy in the debate began in 1999, notably as a result of the reporting by UN representatives on the intensification of violence in Afghanistan (i.e., Topic 10, e.g., UNSC_1999_SPV.4039). Then, UN officials spoke mainly to topics emphasized by Western states, showing a certain bias in substantive focus. Between 2000 and 2003, the bureaucracy positioned itself more centrally in the debate by referring to all central topics that emerged during and after the US-led intervention. Despite variation, the bureaucracy's eigenvector centrality remained high for most subsequent years, indicating its attempts to maintain an impartial role addressing topics that were important to most other UNSC speakers. The decreased eigenvector centrality in 2004–05 and around 2011 resulted from UN officials' near-exclusive focus on one particular topic in each period on which other speakers spoke less: elections in 2004–05 and economic development in 2011. Thus, while the pre-2001 low eigenvector centrality of UN speakers indicated a bias towards Western countries, the later minima indicate a distinct topic focus of the Secretariat.

The introduction of new topics into the UNSC debates

The introduction of a new topic is defined as the first significant increase in topic node degree centrality. For the purpose of this analysis, we consider this to be the case in the year when 10 per cent of all actors or more begin talking about a new topic (for a similar approach based on words instead of topics, see Eggers & Spirling, 2018). This threshold ensures that the appearance of a new topic is not an artefact of the topic modeling but that there is a substantive shift in the debate that should be publicly noticeable. Appendix 5 contains annual changes in normalized degree centrality values for each topic, with the first increases in prevalence of 0.1 or above (highlighted) representing the substantive introduction of a topic. The speaker(s) using words assigned to this topic most frequently or intensively in that year is (are) identified as 'first speaker(s)', i.e., as initial driver(s) of that topic.

We find that topic introduction by the UN bureaucracy can be observed for three topics: *security and reform* in 2000 (Topic 4), *elections* in 2004 (Topic 6), and *economic development* in 2006 (Topic 7). The remaining topics either already existed in 1996, so that topic introduction cannot be traced, or they were introduced by member states.

In 2000, the UN Secretariat was first to speak about *security and reform*. There is some ambiguity as to the exact moment of topic introduction, but in both years (2000/2002), UN speakers referred to the topic with greatest prevalence. We discuss the UN bureaucracy's impact on this topic in more detail in the supplementary case study (Section 6).

UN officials also spoke first, and with high intensity, about *elections* in 2004. Although this topic relates to the presidential elections of 2004 in Afghanistan, an external event that all UNSC speakers could have focused on, the extreme emphasis on the topic by UN speakers indicates how central the UN bureaucracy saw this event while other speakers continued to focus on other aspects.

In 2006, the UN Secretariat co-introduced topic 7 on *economic development* with Japan. The first UN speech on this topic in March 2006 referred extensively to the Afghan Compact conference in London held in February 2006 where states for the first time emphasized 'Economic and Social Development' as one of three pillars of Afghan reconstruction.⁵ This conference was co-organized by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Japan's core intervention on this topic was only in November 2006, reporting on a scoping UNSC mission that highlighted the need for economic development and aid effectiveness, underlining the UN Secretariat's leading role in bringing the topic to UNSC debates.

Hence, beyond maintaining a central and rather impartial position in the UNSC debates, the UN Secretariat set its own priorities and introduced new topics to UNSC discussions. The bureaucracy even introduced a sensitive topic, *security and reform* (see Section 6), and flagged the conduct of elections in Afghanistan. The Secretariat's perspective on security in Afghanistan thus did not only prioritize military matters but included important dimensions of political stability that other UNSC members were not focused on. By introducing economic development as a topic, the UN bureaucracy increased the visibility of events it co-organized and showed that it considered economic recovery of Afghanistan as a topic with relevance for UNSC debates.

The evolution of UN bureaucracy-set topics

Topic introduction may put a speaker in the position to substantively shape a debate. But the impact an introduced topic has depends on whether it resonates. One indicator is to observe whether these newly introduced topics

increased in centrality. Figure 4 shows the normalized degree centrality measures for the three topics identified as introduced by the Secretariat (topics 4, 6, and 7). Since degree centrality calculates the number of ties of a node, the normalized values in Figure 4 report the percentage of participating speakers referring to a topic in a year at the given edge weight threshold.

For topic 4 on *security and reform*, a peak was reached in 2006, with similar values in 2003 and 2007. In the case study below, we illustrate that, and how, the UN Secretariat managed to substantively shape this topic during the early years. Later, post-2003, speeches addressed the lack of success of the international security presence, emphasizing the deteriorating security situation in provinces and the volatility of the Afghan police.

For topic 6 on *elections*, the general level of attention was highest in the years of presidential elections in Afghanistan. In each of those years, no other topic received more attention. While topic 6 is clearly linked to an exogenous event, UN officials were first to put particular emphasis on the matter of elections.

Finally, attention for topic 7, *economic development*, grew gradually. Introduced by the UN Secretariat in 2006, between 20 and 40 per cent of all speakers referred to the topic during all remaining years. The bureaucracy remained a key speaker on this topic, and the UN's decreased eigenvector centrality in 2011 (Figure 3 above) was the result of the UN's near-exclusive emphasis on economic development in that year. In conjunction with the UN's operational involvement in the original Afghan Compact conference in 2006, this underlines how the Secretariat impacted the UNSC debate by thinking early about Afghanistan's economic future and by continuing to keep this topic in discussion among member-states.

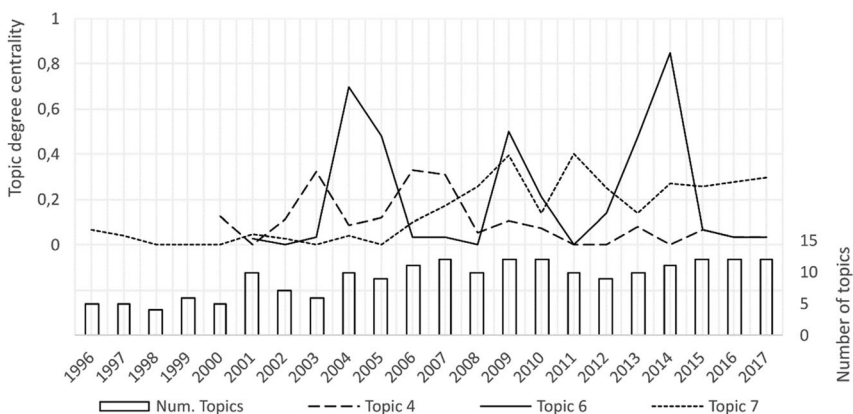


Figure 4. Normalized annual degree centrality for UN speaker topics.

Notes: Introduction of topic 7 is in 2006. Earlier indications of topic presence are spurious and a result of the conservative filtering of speaker-topic associations as described above.

Overall, the data show that the UN Secretariat is able to set new topics and that it, at times, further attempts to shape debates by insisting on topics that UNSC members are not focused on. The Secretariat does so even at the risk of losing its usually impartial position in the debate. Whether bureaucracy-set topics gain in prominence depends in part on exogenous events – such as elections or intergovernmental conferences. Nevertheless, the data already indicate that the UN Secretariat can exhibit agency and provides reasons to believe Secretariat participation impacts the debate. In the following section, we explore if the quantitative indication was substantively meaningful.

Triangulating speaker-topic network insights: the impact of the UN bureaucracy on ‘security and reform’ in Afghanistan

The network-based assessment above allows to identify topics that were introduced by UN officials and which evolved to be central topics afterwards. One such topic is *security and reform*. Introduced by UN officials in 2000/2002, it has degree centrality peaks in 2003 and 2007, indicating potential bureaucratic impact on the debate. In this section, we triangulate these observations with a qualitative assessment of the speeches in the corpus from 2002 until 2004, to show that the UN bureaucracy did indeed set the perimeters of the debate, shaped policy choices and, thus, had a substantive impact on the UNSC.

In one of the first UNSC debates after ground forces of the US-led intervention, ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, had established security perimeters around Kabul, UN officials began advocating openly and with vigor for an expansion of the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond Kabul. During a Council briefing on 6 February 2002, the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, publicly proposed an ‘expansion of ISAF to the rest of the country’ for the first time (S/PV.4469). While a Council discussion on his request did not take place that day, Secretary-General Annan followed up in March with a report on Afghanistan, in which he reiterated the recommendation of an ISAF expansion (S/2002/278, p. 9). The Council met eight days later on the report, demonstrating mixed opinions: While France clearly rejected the proposal, others such as China, the UK, and Bangladesh showed support (S/PV.4497). Brahimi again confirmed the Secretariat’s viewpoint in a speech on 19 July 2002, followed by a lively debate among member-states. France and Russia opposed the ISAF expansion. The Singaporean representative however praised the ‘very brave’ and ‘very strong case’ by Brahimi and Annan. Addressing Brahimi directly, the ambassador underlined:

[M]ost of us are sympathetic and supportive of his request, and if he [Brahimi] could elaborate a little more on this issue, then possibly the case for expanding

ISAF beyond Kabul might, hopefully, gain some traction in the course of these discussions here. (S/PV.4579)

This explicit request led Brahimi to concretize his proposal in his response:

It will not require tens of thousands of soldiers; I think that an additional 5,000 soldiers will do the trick. Thus, it will not be very expensive, and it will not be dangerous. (S/PV.4579)

Member states were, however, still not united on the matter. It took another year and multiple meetings during which Brahimi and other officials reiterated the Secretariat perspective, backed by requests from Afghan representatives. The Security Council finally agreed to expand the ISAF mandate on 13 October 2003 (S/2003/1510) after NATO had assumed strategic command of ISAF (letter to the UN Secretary-General dated 2 October 2003, S/2003/970).

While this does not establish a direct causal link between the Secretariat's position and the ultimate policy decision, it does show that the Secretariat's policy proposal and insistence on the topic affected the debate. Moreover, with a divided and initially undecided Council, the Secretariat's proposals did not reflect a position previously agreed in private consultations. Instead, UN officials demonstrated autonomous agency based on their interpretation of the UN Charter. While the speaker-topic network analysis showed that the UN introduced this topic and that the topic gained in centrality over time, this case study shows how, even in the UNSC, an IO bureaucracy can act as speech-maker tabling controversial policy options and promoting a topic that it perceives important.

Discussion

Two key questions for the network-theoretic conceptualization and measurement of a speaker's impact on a policy debate should be raised to contextualize the above findings. First, are we observing meaningful autonomous agency in the speechmaking of an international bureaucracy? And, second, how is the observed role in the debate related to (international) bureaucratic influence (Eckhard & Ege, 2016; Ege et al., 2021)?

First, an alternative explanation to UN agency is private collusion between UN speakers and key member states. Under this premise, Secretariat statements would be agreed with P5 members before being voiced publicly. In that case, the UN bureaucracy would only speak about topics the P5, or the UNSC as a whole, considers to be agreed and consensual. Yet, the data show that the Secretariat did not limit its speech to such domains. In fact, the post-9/11 debate shows that the UN Secretariat diversified the topics it spoke about, addressed topics that others did not (yet) address and, as the qualitative case study showed, made public proposals that were not

consensual. Observing this in a domain of high politics with initially only a limited role for the bureaucracy means we observe this in a least-likely situation. The Secretariat, it seems, acted as autonomous speechmaker.

Second, even though we find quantitative indications and qualitative confirmation for impact on UNSC *debates*, this cannot be equated with *policy* influence. Parts of the UNSC negotiations are not public and, hence, policy impact remains a black box. At the same time, speakers use the public debates as a platform for strategic information transmission and to create demand for action. The case study on security and reform showed that UN speakers leverage this platform and that the outcome was congruent with the publicly voiced bureaucratic preferences – a situation typically referred to as bureaucratic policy influence (Ege et al., 2021). Although congruence is not enough to infer causation, the speaker-topic network analysis does provide a good basis to direct further research. It can, for instance, identify most-likely cases for bureaucratic influence.

Finally, there are limitations in the measurement through annual speaker-topic networks based on topic modeling. While topic modeling as a bag-of-words approach can show differences in speakers' substantive focus, it may not detect differences in detailed positions or frames. Annual snapshots may also not be fine-grained enough to detect impact within or across debates, requiring additional qualitative coding of debates or more advanced methods of natural language processing. However, while qualitative approaches are feasible at the level of an individual UNSC agenda item, the speaker-topic network approach presented here can be scaled up to the entire corpus with dozens of agenda items. This may allow different research strategies such as case comparisons, across agenda items and over time, and explorations of the scope conditions under which a discursive impact of the UN bureaucracy is (most) likely.

Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed a novel approach to measure and visualize the role of speakers in policy debates represented by large-scale, longitudinal speech corpora. Combining natural language processing of public speech-making with a network theoretical perspective, we show that it is possible to observe socio-semantic speaker-topic networks through a semi-automated workflow from Structural Topic Modeling to the calculation of degree and eigenvector centralities of topics and speakers to infer on *speaker position*, *topic introduction*, and *topic evolution*.

We used this quantitative approach to study the role of UN bureaucrats in the debate on Afghanistan in the UN Security Council. We find that the UN bureaucracy generally positioned itself as impartial by mostly addressing topics mentioned by key member states. Yet, UN speakers also shaped

UNSC debates by introducing new topics that gained in centrality, at least for short periods. A qualitative triangulation suggests that such instances of topic introduction and promotion can represent autonomous speechmaking with discursive impact and even lead to policy influence. Considering Afghanistan debates a least-likely case, the Secretariat's impact may even be more pervasive in agenda items where the national and security interests of key member states are less pronounced.

This study made three contributions: *Empirically*, it is the first substantive use of a novel UNSC speeches corpus (Schönfeld et al., 2019). The corpus provides a unique opportunity to study the Security Council's public discursive dynamics over extended time periods and a wide variety of sub-corpora such as the one on Afghanistan 1996–2017 used here.

Second, the network-theoretic concepts introduced – *speaker position*, *topic introduction*, and *topic evolution* – and the methodological operationalization presented can complement existing discourse network analyses based on manual coding of speakers' substantive focus (e.g., Leifeld & Haunss, 2012). Building on the analysis presented here, future studies could add layers of data such as voting behavior or by mining speakers' opinions vis-à-vis certain topics to compare these with the speaker-topic networks. In addition, the concepts and methods introduced here are relevant for a broader range of research fields working with speech corpora on policy debates (e.g., Baturo et al., 2017; Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2021; Rauh, 2021).

Finally, and *theoretically*, our combined quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate agency of international bureaucrats in UNSC debates. This complements the growing field of research on the entrepreneurial behavior of international public administrations in global policy-making (Bauer et al., 2017; Eckhard & Ege, 2016; Jankauskas, 2021; Littoz-Monnet, 2021; Patz & Goetz, 2019; Thorvaldsdottir et al., 2021). We demonstrate that UN officials, even beyond the Secretary-General, participate in and shape UNSC debates. Further explorations of the UNSC debate corpus and similar corpora will allow mapping the full set of situations, topics and context conditions that are associated with independent speechmaking by international bureaucrats.

Notes

1. A recent update of the corpus (V5) includes 82,165 speeches from 1995 to 2020.
2. In the year 2015, there were 170 informal (non-public) and 240 formal (public) meetings.
3. Corpus data, the topic modeling and the consequences of (alternative) parameter choices can be explored here: <https://dmwg.shinyapps.io/lingopac>
4. See Appendix 3 for an extended discussion.
5. London Conference on Afghanistan, see: https://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/afghanistan_compact.pdf

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Note: All UN documents cited in this paper can be accessed with their UN document number at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/?ln=en>

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