جامعة نيويورك أبوظبي

NYU ABU DHABI

THE DUAL SIGNALING GAME

Synthesizing leader competence and international resolve

Ali Al Dailati | Laidlaw Scholars Programme | Research conducted with Dr. Ömer Faruk Örsün

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00 THE RESEARCH PUZZLE

How do domestic audiences infer competence while international adversaries infer resolve?

Citizens infer a leader's competence from economic performance, foreign-policy outcomes, and crisis behavior. Adversaries face a parallel problem: whether threats and commitments will be carried out.

Contribution: the same foreign-policy action can inform domestic audiences about competence and international adversaries about resolve.

01 DOMESTIC COMPETENCE

A SIGNAL-EXTRACTION PROBLEM

Citizens rarely observe competence directly; they infer it from noisy economic and political signals.

1. **Economic noise**
   Duch & Stevenson (2010)
   Globalization weakens the link between national performance and incumbent competence.

2. **Responsibility diffusion**
   Powell & Whitten (1993); Oktay (2018)
   Fragmented institutions can obscure responsibility and shield leaders from electoral punishment.

3. **Crisis performance**
   Smith (1998)
   Foreign-policy outcomes can reveal leader quality and generate endogenous audience costs.

4. **Principal-agent incentives**
   Downs & Rocke (1994); Croco (2011)
   Retrospective evaluation can reward outcomes over decision quality and encourage escalation.

5. **Diversionary incentives**
   Tarar (2006)
   Leaders may provoke crises when domestic signals of competence are weak.

NOISY SIGNALS → UNCERTAIN ATTRIBUTION → CRISIS PERFORMANCE → COMPETENCE INFERENCE

THE DUAL SIGNALING GAME



DOMESTIC INCENTIVES
Electoral survival | Competence signaling
Audience costs | Responsibility attribution

STRATEGIC PROBLEM
How can competence and resolve be demonstrated simultaneously?

INTERNATIONAL INCENTIVES
Deterrence | Compellence
Credibility | Resolve

ONE ACTION. TWO AUDIENCES. TWO INFERENCES.

The same foreign-policy behavior can be read as a signal of resolve abroad and competence at home.

03 THE SYNTHESIS

DOMESTIC EVALUATION ← CRISIS BEHAVIOR → INTERNATIONAL CREDIBILITY

KEY INSIGHT **International crisis behavior is simultaneously a signal of resolve and a signal of competence.**

This creates a fundamental tension: actions that increase external credibility can raise domestic political exposure, while strategies designed to avoid domestic punishment can weaken international credibility.

05 TENSIONS IN THE LITERATURE

DEBATE	ONE SIDE	COMPLICATING EVIDENCE
Audience costs	Fearon: domestic punishment can make threats credible.	Snyder & Borghard; Trachtenberg: empirical importance is disputed.
Democracy & signaling	Institutions provide information and accountability.	Slantchev: military instruments can also signal.
Public commitments	Publicity can strengthen credibility.	Baum: leaders sometimes avoid publicity.
Competence & outcomes	Outcomes reveal leader quality.	Downs & Rocke; Croco: outcome-based evaluation can backfire.
Accountability	Institutions clarify responsibility.	Oktay: institutional diffusion can shield leaders.

02 INTERNATIONAL RESOLVE

MAKING COMMITMENTS CREDIBLE

Adversaries face a parallel information problem: they must determine whether a leader's threats and commitments reflect genuine resolve.

1. **Commitment mechanisms**
   Schelling (1960, 1966)
   Credible coercion often restricts one's options and manipulates risk.

2. **Audience costs**
   Fearon (1994, 1997)
   Public commitments may become credible because backing down is politically costly.

3. **Military signaling**
   Slantchev (2005)
   Mobilization can sink costs and tie hands independent of democratic institutions.

4. **Psychological foundations**
   Kertzer (2016)
   Resolve reflects dispositions and incentives, rather than a fixed trait.

5. **Follow-through**
   McManus (2017)
   Credibility depends on domestic and material capacity to act.

CHEAP TALK → COSTLY SIGNAL → COMMITMENT / MOBILIZATION → ADVERSARY BELIEFS

07 RESEARCH AGENDA

How does democratic accountability function when the public can observe more, attribute less, and interpret events through increasingly polarized information environments?

OBSERVE MORE | ATTRIBUTE LESS | INTERPRET DIFFERENTLY

04 WHERE SIGNALING BREAKS DOWN

1. **Principal-agent problems** — Voters may punish outcomes rather than decision quality.
2. **Gambling for resurrection** — Failing leaders may escalate losing wars to avoid political demise.
3. **Going private** — Leaders reduce transparency to evade audience costs.
4. **Responsibility diffusion** — Institutional fragmentation blurs blame.
5. **Polarization** — Competing narratives undermine shared interpretation.

06 THE MODERN SIGNALING PROBLEM

Classic signaling is harder to sustain in a crowded, real-time, and contested information environment.

1. **Polarization** — Different narratives produce incompatible interpretations.
2. **OSINT** — Civilians can observe battlefields in real time.
3. **Cyberwarfare** — Attribution is uncertain and action is less visible.
4. **Drones** — Physical costs are less visible to citizens.
5. **Proxy warfare** — Responsibility is harder to attribute.
6. **Information manipulation** — Actors compete over the meaning of events.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Baum (2002) | Croco (2011) | Downs & Rocke (1994) | Duch & Stevenson (2010) | Fearon (1994, 1997) | Kertzer (2016) | McManus (2017) | Oktay (2018) | Powell & Whitten (1993) | Schelling (1960, 1966) | Slantchev (2005) | Smith (1998) | Snyder & Borghard (2012) | Tarar (2006)