

I

Can Adversaries Communicate?

The relationship between Austria and Russia was without hint of conflict in the first half of the nineteenth century. Austrians wept with joy when Russia offered military assistance against the Hungarians, and the Austrian Emperor traveled to Warsaw, where he knelt on one knee to kiss the Tsar's hand. The two powers signed an agreement to conduct their foreign policies "only together and in a perfect spirit of solidarity," and the Tsar told foreign diplomats, "when I speak of Russia, I speak of Austria as well." Yet, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the two empires were in constant tension, and often directly at odds. Russia offered aid and support against Austrian interests, first to Sardinia and Prussia, enabling those states to form Italy and Germany, and later to Serbia and other Balkan powers, leading to the World War.¹ This dramatic shift in Russian policy towards Austria happened suddenly in the 1850s and did not result from changes in national capabilities or material interests; what brought it about?

Another important shift in European politics occurred during the Great Eastern Crisis in 1876. Germany and Russia had previously had the closest of relations, while Germany and Austria had fought a war a decade before. Yet, during the Great Eastern Crisis, a rift formed between Germany and Russia, while Germany and Austria-Hungary drew closer together. The German statesman, Otto von Bismarck, was convinced that the words his ambassador to Russia had uttered to the Tsar had brought about this "new situation" in Europe.² Soon after, Germany signed the alliance with Austria that lasted until both Empires were destroyed fighting side by side in the cataclysm of the First World War. What did produce this new situation and how did it then convince Germany and

¹ Deak (2001, p. 289), Puryear (1931, pp. 20–21, 228), Trager (2012).

² Bismarck (1915, p. 286).

Austria to bind themselves in a rare, permanent alliance despite having recently fought each other in a war?

The twentieth century contains many examples of similar shifts in leaders' beliefs and policies with lasting consequences. At the turn of the century, for instance, Russo-Austrian relations were merely conflictual, but by 1914, the Austrian emperor had come to believe that Russian policy aimed at "the destruction of my empire."³ Austrian statesmen, who had previously rated Germany an unreliable ally, came to believe instead during the July Crisis that Germany could be relied upon in an existential struggle.⁴ In the latter half of the century, during the early Cold War, the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer decided to build nuclear weapons with the expectation that this would ultimately be tolerated by his American and French allies. Not long after the Cuban Missile Crisis, however, Germany reversed course, deciding that it had to accept nonnuclear status because it came to believe that the United States would tolerate nothing else. This acceptance of nonnuclear status, and the American guarantee that it would remain in effect, was the essential final element of the settlement and associated reduction of Cold War tensions known as *détente*, which pulled the world back from the brink of nuclear disaster. In fundamental respects, this settlement is with us today, and Germany still has no nuclear weapons of her own.⁵ These shifts in beliefs and policies were of great consequence; what were their causes?

The answers to all of these questions are the same: diplomatic encounters that occurred behind closed doors, away from public view. Some of these encounters occurred during military crises in which there was a danger of war, while others occurred outside of them. Some reactions were caused by demands, and others by acquiescences. The effects produced were often felt over the long term and had profound influences on history's subsequent course. But for such consequences to follow from diplomatic statements, something had to be learned from them, and it is often difficult to understand why diplomats and leaders should trust what each other say.

Consider the meeting of US President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Khrushchev in Vienna in June of 1961. Khrushchev threatened to sign a peace treaty with East Germany in December, thereby ending the right of the US to station occupying troops in West Berlin. A failure by the

³ Die Österreichisch-Ungarischen Dokumente zum Kriegausbruch (ÖUDK), Franz Josef to Wilhelm, July 2, 1914.

⁴ ÖUDK, Erster Teil, 58, Ministerrat für gemeinsame Angelegenheiten, July 7, 1914.

⁵ Trachtenberg (1999, Chapter 9).

US to remove its troops would be taken as a challenge, he implied, and “the USSR will have no choice other than to accept the challenge; it must respond and it will respond. The calamities of a war will be shared equally.” The decision to sign a peace treaty with East Germany, Khrushchev stated, was “firm and irrevocable.”⁶ Both leaders knew that they were talking about a potential nuclear war, a war whose effects, as Kennedy described them during the meeting, “would go from generation to generation.”⁷ Was Khrushchev to be believed? Given his incentive to overstate Soviet resolve in order to get his way, was his threat of escalation credible? How can leaders draw conclusions about their adversaries’ intentions from mere statements? To answer these questions is to understand much about how international crises are resolved or lead to conflict and how international orders are created.

COMMUNICATING INTENTION

Social life involves cooperation within groups and competition between them. Yet, human group allegiances shift. Partners may become adversaries and one-time adversaries may make common cause and become partners. Appraising the intentions of potential adversaries and partners, therefore, is fundamental to advancement and, sometimes, to survival. For leaders in international politics, the stakes are particularly high. Sound appraisals of other leaders’ intentions can lead to policies that avoid wars, while misapprehensions can lead to societal decline. When a false impression can have such dire consequences, how do leaders come to understand each other’s intentions?

Because states are potential adversaries, communicating intentions is difficult. Many statements by diplomats and leaders cannot be taken at face value. Diplomats, who might divulge their state’s plans in conversation, often have incentives to misrepresent the intentions of their state’s leaders. In conversation, simply saying one thing, when one intends another, appears to carry little cost.⁸

Leaders that intend aggression against another state, for instance, have incentive to pretend that they do not, so that their adversary does not have time to prepare for conflict. François de Callières, the famous French student of diplomacy, argued along these lines in 1716 that a threat should be made just before the blow so that the threatened leader would “not have the time and pretext to guard himself against it by entering

⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, Volume V, p. 230.

⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, Volume V, p. 228.

⁸ Fearon (1995).

into alliances with other princes.”⁹ The diplomatic statements of a leader following this advice would certainly be misleading, if not strictly dishonest, until a threat was finally made just before the sword fell. For similar strategic reasons, Japan, when it planned to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor, and Israel, when it planned to attack Iraq at Osirak, gave no warning at all.

Leaders willing to make concessions to avoid conflict also have incentives to hide their intentions from adversaries. Though a leader is willing to concede the issues of the day, she would surely rather not. For this reason, diplomats sometimes overstate their state’s resolve to resist making a concession. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, the Kennedy administration signaled that it would accept a secret deal – removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba in return for removal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey¹⁰ – but not a public agreement to the same effect. The truth, however, was that the Kennedy administration had decided to accept just such a public trade, under the auspices of the United Nations, if the Soviets declined the US offer of a secret deal.¹¹ Should Khrushchev have drawn an inference about US resolve from these diplomatic communications that occurred away from public view or should these exchanges have been ignored? Whatever the answer, the stakes could not have been higher. Today, Iran and North Korea maintain they would respond to United States attacks on their nuclear facilities with attacks on the United States. Should these threats be believed?

A state that has poor relations with another state, or intends an aggressive policy against that state, can also have an incentive to hide this fact from third parties. One reason is that a conflict is a drain on a state’s resources and makes the state vulnerable to opposing coalitions. Thus, the prospect of a conflict will reduce a state’s negotiating leverage with third parties whose allegiance could be swayed by one side or the other. States with known enemies often find they are less able to press their interests in negotiations with unaligned states. This is particularly visible at the start of conflicts, when poor relations can no longer be concealed, with the result that states commonly offer concessions to unaligned states to secure their allegiance or neutrality.

On occasion, leaders even have incentives to hide their intentions from their own allies. Suppose a leader is willing to support an ally in a war against a third state. If the ally were assured of support, it might provoke the third state and thereby precipitate a war. Even when a leader is willing

⁹ de Callières (1983, p. 149).

¹⁰ The US also offered a pledge not to invade Cuba.

¹¹ Fursenko and Naftali (1999).

to bring her nation into a war in necessity, she may well also prefer to avoid having to do so. For this reason, countries sometimes mistrust the attempts of their own allies to restrain their behavior and gamble that their allies will follow them into conflicts. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire correctly made this calculation in precipitating the Crimean War after the other Powers had agreed on a settlement. At the start of the twentieth century, Austria–Hungary made the same calculation in the July Crisis that developed into the World War.

Yet, in spite of the numerous reasons to mistrust the statements of adversaries and sometimes even of allies, for millennia, almost certainly longer than recorded history, diplomats and leaders have drawn inferences from conversations about each other's intentions. They have discussed, codified and reacted, and their reactions have been influenced by the content, form and context of messages from adversaries and friends. The Amarna Letters contain a record of the diplomatic correspondence between Egyptian Pharaohs and the other "Great Kings" of the fourteenth century BCE. Other writings from the ancient world contain records of treaties, such as the one concluded by the Egyptian and Hittite Empires around 1259 BCE. In the heroic period in ancient Greece, Odysseus was praised for diplomatic skill and words that "fell fast like snowflakes in winter."¹² Hundreds of years later, in 412 BCE, the Spartans conceded to recognize Persian sovereignty over the Greeks of Asia Minor. The concession must have signaled information about Spartan intentions because Persia supported Sparta against Athens thereafter, resulting in decisive Athenian defeat in less than a decade.¹³ Similar evidence of important diplomatic exchanges is found in the records of many other ancient cultures including the Chinese, Indian, and Mayan.

An astounding volume of diplomatic exchange continues today. In 1817, there were fewer than 200 diplomatic missions in foreign countries, while today there are over 8,000.¹⁴ The increasing density of diplomatic representation over the past 200 years can be seen in Figure 1.1. Whereas in the past it could take months for an ambassador to reach a host country, a Secretary of State, Foreign Minister, Prime Minister or President can now often reach a counterpart by telephone in moments. High-level officials regularly visit each other directly. In negotiating the removal of Soviet nuclear missiles from Ukraine following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, for instance, US President Clinton

¹² Adcock and Mosley (1975, p. 10).

¹³ Thucydides (1989, Book 8: 18, 37, 58), Xenophon (1907, Book 2, Chapter 2).

¹⁴ Bayer (2006).

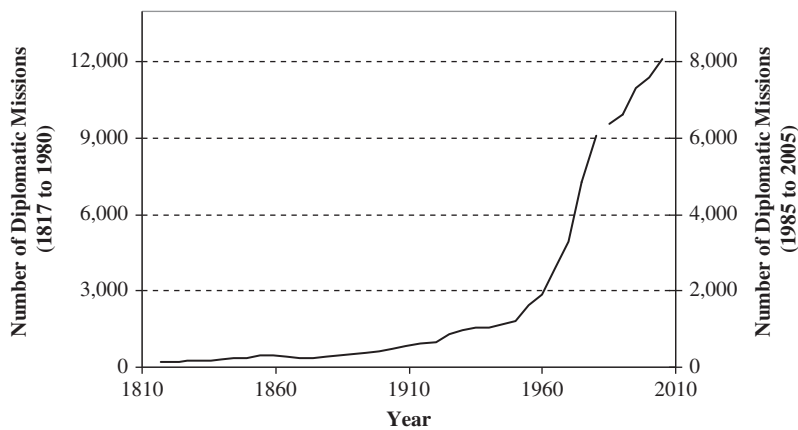


FIGURE 1.1 Diplomatic Representation from 1817 to 2005

Source: Correlates of War Diplomatic Exchange Data Set, Version 2006.1 by Resat Bayer. Note that the data up to 1980 is not comparable to the data after 1980 because the former counts multiple entries for single diplomatic representatives accredited to multiple countries, whereas the latter does not.

made stops first in Brussels, then in Prague, where he met with Central European leaders, and then in Kiev, before signing the finished agreement with Russian President Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Kravchuk in Moscow.¹⁵ With so much industry devoted to diplomatic activity, it is not surprising that histories of modern times, even those that do not set out to analyze diplomatic events, sometimes point to diplomatic exchanges as key moments when perceptions were formed that determined important foreign policy decisions.

The presence of diplomatic activity throughout history and its ever-expanding nature today suggest that diplomacy plays a fundamental role in relations between states, and this leaves us with an old puzzle: how do adversaries communicate when they have so many reasons to deceive? The answer shows us how many of the expectations that are the basis of foreign policy decisions and constitute international orders form in the international system. It helps us to understand the processes through which actors demarcate spheres of influence, agree on settlements, and decide which dangers are the most pressing or which potential allies are reliable. Arguments for war or peace often hinge on what has been learned in diplomatic exchanges. Investigating this question means appreciating how diplomats and leaders develop beliefs about what their allies and adversaries plan to do through evaluating the *balances of conflicting incentives* of their foreign counterparts.

¹⁵ For an exciting and amusing account of these negotiations, see Talbott (2003, pp. 110–115).

A fundamental thesis of this book is that, in spite of a variety of reasons to misrepresent their intentions, very often, conversations between representatives of adversarial states allow the sides to draw inferences about each other's plans. When diplomacy is conducted away from public view, as most of it is, this occurs through five principal mechanisms. The existence of diplomatic channels can increase or decrease the likelihood of conflict, depending on a complex, interacting set of factors. Often, communication is possible because one set of factors gives state representatives incentives to mislead in one fashion, such as by overstating their willingness to fight over an issue, but another set of factors provides incentives to mislead in an opposed manner, such as by understating their resolve to engage in conflict. This book derives the conditions under which balances of incentives occur that allow adversaries to communicate. Evidence for this theory of communication is drawn from a variety of cases and from analysis of large datasets drawn from decades of British diplomatic correspondence contained in the archive known as the *Confidential Print*.

Forming judgments from the diplomacy of potential adversaries is no simple task. Nevertheless, the empirical analysis of later chapters demonstrates beyond doubt that such conclusions are frequently drawn. Thus, as Niccolò Machiavelli wrote to an inexperienced diplomat, sent by Florence as ambassador to the court of Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, "It is very difficult to penetrate the secret of such conclusions, and it is therefore necessary to depend upon one's judgment and conjectures. But to find out all the intrigues, and to conjecture the issue correctly, that is indeed difficult, for you have nothing to depend upon except surmises aided by your own judgment."¹⁶ Through reason and conjecture, in conversations and negotiations, impressions are formed that constitute actor expectations about the intentions of others.

These conversations have immediate impacts on policies, within international crises and outside of them, but they also have longer-term effects on the international order of the day. This is because social orders consist of expectations about when and how actors will engage in cooperation or conflict. Such expectations become "settled" over time as they are shown to be substantially consistent with actors' true natures and intentions. Once settled, or to the extent that they are, they constitute an international order.¹⁷ Settled expectations often identify the sets of states

¹⁶ Berridge (2004, p. 42).

¹⁷ The idea that an international order is constituted by settled expectations is associated with Bull (1977), but he defined order more specifically in relation to the processes that further particular primary purposes of the society of states. Among these purposes are the preservation of the society of states, the preservation of the independence of

that will balance against sets of other states, and the rules by which even the powerful have committed to live. In Ikenberry's (2008) terms, they define whether the order is hegemonic, constitutional, or based upon a balance of power. They indicate the conditions under which the powerful will comply with international law and exercise other forms of restraint, and the extent to which they will impose restraint on others.

Diplomatic conversations shape these expectations, which they settle and unsettle. In the short term, diplomacy often serves the cause of peace by allowing actors to reveal what they are willing to fight for, thereby enabling them to avoid the necessity of doing so. But diplomatic representations can also provoke, embolden, and alarm. Over the longer term, diplomatic exchange plays a leading role in constructing the international order, and different orders imply different frequencies and intensities of conflict. Thus, in shaping actor expectations, diplomacy is not universally on the side of greater order and peace.

PERCEPTIONS OF INTENTIONS AND THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The question of how states draw inferences about each other's plans from a variety of sources, including diplomatic exchange, is central to the study of international politics because the issue of war or peace is often thought to depend on these perceptions of intent. When Kennedy met Khrushchev in Vienna, for instance, both men inferred that the other was likely to conduct a more aggressive foreign policy than each had believed previously, and both altered their own policies as a result. Immediately following the meeting, Khrushchev "approved most of a KGB plan to create 'a situation in various areas of the world that would favor the dispersion of attention and resources by the United States and their satellites, and would tie them down during the settlement of a German peace treaty and West Berlin,'" and shortly thereafter Kennedy told the Joint Chiefs to plan for the possibility of a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union.¹⁸ What inferences did these men draw from their conversations that led them to take these drastic actions? More generally, how

individual states, and the limitation of violence. The definition given above is closely related to the one offered in Ikenberry (2008, p. 23), but with less emphasis on "explicit principles, rules, and institutions" and also less emphasis on "mutual" or intersubjective understandings. Settled expectations usually are shared, but to define them in that way introduces the question unnecessarily of how widely they must be shared. For discussions of other definitions of international order, see Hurrell (2007), Gilpin (1983), Reus-Smit (1997), and Fabbrini and Marchetti (2016, Chapter 1).

¹⁸ See Fursenko and Naftali (1999, p. 138) and Lieber and Press (2006, p. 36).

do leaders draw such inferences and what sorts of factors play the largest roles in shaping leader perceptions of the international environment and of the intentions of other leaders?

Such questions have been a focus of scholarly inquiry. Thucydides addressed related questions in the fifth century BC, Morgenthau (1948) discussed these issues in the mid-twentieth century, Jervis (1970, 1976) later wrote two seminal works on the topic, and this field of inquiry remains active today. Some scholars argue that state reputations play a key role in other leaders' evaluations of state intentions (e.g., Schelling 1966, 1980; Jervis 1976; Sartori 2005), while other scholars argue the opposite (e.g., Press 2005, Mercer 1996). Fearon (1995) argues on rationalist grounds that diplomatic statements made behind closed doors are unlikely to affect other leaders' beliefs about intentions, and many studies have accepted this view, but Sartori (2005), Guisinger and Smith (2002), Kurizaki (2007), Trager (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), Hall (2011), Yarhi-Milo (2013), and others argue to the contrary. Kydd (2005) argues that "trust," which itself is influenced greatly by state decisions to arm, is a central determinant of perceptions of intentions. He further argues that a state's perception of other states' perceptions of itself will determine what inferences about likely future behavior and intentions the first state draws from the actions of the other states. A state that knows it is perceived to have revisionist designs may realize that security measures taken by other states are taken out of fear rather than aggressive intent. Slantchev (2005, 2010) models the inferences that states draw from military mobilizations. Fearon (1994a) and Tarar and Leventoglu (2009) model the impact of public threats on adversaries' perceptions of state resolve. These works are a sampling from large literatures that address related topics.

The answers to many questions of great policy and scholarly importance hinge on how states draw inferences. Should wars be fought in the name of maintaining a reputation for resolve to defend a set of interests, as was, for instance, the Vietnam War? Certainly, they should only if state leaders draw inferences about what states will do in the future by looking to the past to evaluate each other's reputations. Do the closed-door conversations of diplomats constitute an essential element of the processes that determine the course of events in the international system? Again, they do only if leaders look to those conversations in understanding how states will act and in formulating courses of action themselves. Do decisions to build particular sorts of arms impact another state's evaluation of how hostile the arming state is? When a state arms, will other states conclude it is more aggressive generally or only more potentially hostile to a small set of states with which it has known

conflicts? In short, we cannot understand the forces that shape events in the international system without understanding how states develop perceptions of each other's intentions. Answers to these and many similar questions are central to understanding international political processes.

THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

In contrast to the scholarly focus on how perceptions of intentions form generally, the specific attention devoted to the role of diplomatic exchange in these processes has been meager. Considering the volume of diplomatic activity that continues the world over, if diplomacy influences the course of events at all, the subject has been vastly understudied, particularly recently. In fact, the relative absence of scholarship focused on diplomatic processes is evident across diverse approaches to understanding international politics.

Within history departments, the turn away from traditional diplomatic history has been pronounced. One point of agreement among divergent twentieth century historiographic movements (the Annales School, Marxist history, the *histoire sérielle*, and others) has been to reject elite focused histories. The great currents of history, these scholars argued, are economic and social. From this perspective, traditional diplomatic history, with its careful reconstructing of specific actions and motivations of elite diplomats, appeared superficial and even immoral. Efforts to understand international events in terms of the logic of the international system nearly ceased in history faculties.¹⁹

Later, diplomatic history was superseded by “international history,” which encompasses the study of diplomatic events but emphasizes the need to do so only while also placing these events in broader social and economic contexts. While this may appear reasonable and important, the constraint of time means that historians are less able to carefully reconstruct and analyze the complicated strategic calculations in which diplomats regularly engage. It has also proven nearly impossible to bring such depth of analysis to all societies that are involved, in some way, in many diplomatic episodes.²⁰

One exception to the rule among historians proves its general validity. In his foundational study of the Crimean War, Paul Schroeder nearly

¹⁹ For an insightful and humorous review of the Annales School alongside other historiographic schools, see Forster (1978).

²⁰ Happily, there are histories that do focus on the diplomatic calculus, including Trachtenberg (1999), Gaddis (2006), Elliott (2002), Parker (2000), Schroeder (1996), and Gavin (2004).