

Difference Worthy of Mediation?

US-China Rapprochement Reappraised in a New Framework of Diplomatic Normalization

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into diplomatic normalization. It seeks to understand how and why erstwhile enemies enter into diplomatic relations with one another. The thesis claims that this is a process of change. To explore the unfolding of this process, the thesis introduces a new framework of diplomatic normalization with three stages. The first is estrangement, or the problematization of the old state of affairs in which the absence of diplomatic relations is accepted as a matter of course. The second is conceptualization, or the articulation of a new purpose of the relationship in which the turn to diplomatic relations becomes a desirable change. The third, and final, stage is enactment, or the implementation of diplomatic relations in the form of diplomatic dialogue between erstwhile enemies. Overall, this process is triggered if diplomatic mediation is necessary as well as possible in the relationship.

Empirically, the thesis demonstrates the analytical purchase of this framework in the case of US-China rapprochement. It finds that the need for diplomatic relations with China were rooted in the Nixon-administration's estrangement from conventional ways of thinking about, as well as practicing, American foreign policy. This estrangement led to a conceptualization of US foreign policy in terms of *realpolitik* in which improved ties with China became a desirable change. Diplomatic normalization was enacted in the pioneering diplomatic encounters of Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai in 1971. The success of these meetings depended on accepting the American claim that the Nixon-administration is different from previous administrations, and that this difference lies in its exceptional political agency to change relations with China.

In opposition to the mainstream literature on US-China rapprochement, the thesis shows that the great convergence in *realpolitik* between the US and the PRC did not happen. *Realpolitik* was simply the kernel of a social narrative nurtured by the Nixon-administration in its dealings with China. It fueled diplomatic dialogue because it established in the American perspective a fundamental similarity between the American self and the Chinese other. Therefore, it was change in American normative disposition, rather than change in China's foreign policy fueled by an objective Soviet threat, that triggered the process of diplomatic normalization between erstwhile enemies.

Declaration

I hereby declare that no parts of this thesis have been accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. This thesis contains no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.



Tamás Ferenc Peragovics

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*To my daughters, Julia and Alice,
for anchoring me in an unanchorable world*

“The man in Peking and the man in Washington are infinitely far apart on issues and goals, but in a curious way they will not meet as strangers.”¹

¹ *Life Magazine* 71, no. 5 (July 30, 1971): 6.

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List of Acronyms

CCP	China's Communist Party
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
NSS	National Security Study
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
PRC	People's Republic of China
UAE	United Arab Emirates
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

1. Introduction

1.1. Towards theoretical and empirical puzzles

In an edited volume published in 1987, US Ambassador George C. McGhee formulated what he believed to be the essence of sound diplomatic practice. Instead of drawing up images of the ideal diplomat, a well-known pastime in many classical studies on diplomacy, McGhee focused on something else and defined the art of diplomacy in the following way:

“A problem that has proven intractable over a long period of time may suddenly, because of changing circumstances, become “possible.” There are few ideas concerning most international problems that have not been thought of. The art of diplomacy is to sense the time at which an idea which has proven nonnegotiable can, because of changes in the many variables involved, be successfully ‘slipped into place’.”²

This formulation is about a particular moment in time and space, when occasions of rare potential present themselves. Characterized by a confluence of circumstances, these can be conducive for change in the right direction, but only if practitioners have an eye for identifying them and take the initiative. The picture of diplomacy presented above is that of an art *par excellence*. It revolves around creative and imaginative acts, and it requires sensitivity and aptness. With the appropriate attitude, statesmen can thus find an opening and begin the hard work of transcending a conflict that so far proved intractable. For McGhee, diplomats are at their finest in these moments, when they make the case for the *necessity* of a positive resolution, and invest in constructing the conditions for its *possibility*.

² George Crews McGhee, ed., *Diplomacy for the Future* (Lanham, MD: Washington, D.C: University Press of America; Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, 1987), 100.

This thesis is interested in how and why erstwhile enemies establish diplomatic relations with one another. This is a process that concludes a diplomatically abnormal state of the relationship and inaugurates a diplomatically normal one in its stead. The existing literature seems to have paid scant attention to this transition. Berridge and Lloyd explain the difference between normal and abnormal diplomatic relations (emphasis added):

“The situation enjoyed by two *states that can communicate with each other unhampered by any formal obstacles. It is the prerequisite for *normal* **diplomacy* (sense 1) and states finding themselves in this situation are said to have or be in diplomatic relations with each other. Thus each may address the other, express views to the other and reach agreements with the other, such business usually being done through *diplomatic agents. Moreover, those agents may interact freely with each other. In the absence of diplomatic relations, none of these activities is likely to be straightforward and may even be impossible: when two states are not in diplomatic relations either is fully entitled to refuse any contact with the other. Thus, being in ³diplomatic relations is the usual (and easy) means of maintaining permanent contact between two states.”⁴

The authors further specify that official recognition is most often a key precondition before states can *be in* diplomatic relations with one another:

“Diplomatic relations are established by agreement. That agreement is often explicit, but it may also be implicit. A precondition for it is the recognition of each state by the other. Especially in the case of a new state, recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations may take place simultaneously.”⁵

This “restoration of *diplomatic relations” is what this dictionary defines as normalization. It also defines it as restoration “plus a growth in trade, cultural exchanges, tourism, and other such

³ Geoff Berridge and Alan James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 2nd ed (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 189.

⁴ Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 80.

⁵ Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 80.

indications of a close relationship,”⁶ but this is not a significant departure in meaning. The issue with the first sense of normalization is that it is tied to the establishment of official diplomatic relations. In this view, normal diplomatic relations are the outcome of, or synonymous with, normalization understood as official recognition. The second meaning is more permissive in considering a range of other activities *being normalized* between two states. Yet, this broadening is still framed as coming about after normal diplomatic relations are restored.

These definitions are not particularly helpful for a thesis interested in a distinct process *leading up* to normalization. If the focus is on how and why erstwhile enemies decide to normalize their relations, then the approach offered by Alan James is more apposite.⁷ Diplomatic relations are, in essence,

“the pre-condition for unhindered diplomacy, the handle which opens the door to the establishment of embassies, both resident and non-resident, to the easy despatch [sic] of special missions, and hence to all activity in which diplomats commonly engage.”⁸

In this approach, the establishment of diplomatic relations is necessarily *prior to* normalization understood as official recognition. This comes close to the sense in which the thesis uses the term ‘diplomatic normalization’. It refers not to the extension of mutual recognition, but to the handle that opens the door to all subsequent activity in which diplomats commonly engage. Because the transition from non-diplomatic relations to diplomatic relations is a process that cannot be equated

⁶ Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 189.

⁷ Alan James, “Diplomatic Relations between States,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, eds. Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016), 257–68.

⁸ James, “Diplomatic Relations,” 257.

with official recognition, this thesis is interested in theorizing why and how this *pioneering handle* comes about between erstwhile enemies.

In these terms, questions related to diplomatic normalization have not featured high on the agenda of diplomatic studies. Topics adjacent to it have been explored extensively. Studies abound on the recognition and non-recognition of states,⁹ on conducting unofficial and substate diplomacy,¹⁰ and on engaging and communicating with unrecognized states.¹¹ These literatures are concerned with how states recognize one another, what happens in the absence of recognition, and what are the specific tools available for unrecognized entities to enter into meaningful exchanges with other unrecognized entities and states. Though rich and encompassing, these literatures are of little use for this thesis. Its primary interest is not in the political and diplomatic practices at disposal before and/or after official recognition takes place. Rather, this thesis is interested in the *transition* from a diplomatically abnormal state of affairs to a diplomatically normal one. The distinction between political and legal recognition helps bring out what is at stake in this transition.¹² While a legal act of recognition is accepted to mean the recognition of a *fait accompli*, a political act of recognition

⁹ Thomas D. Grant, *The Recognition of States: Law and Practice in Debate and Evolution* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999); Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, "Living with Non-Recognition: State- and Nation-Building in South Caucasian Quasi-States," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 3 (May 2008): 483–509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130801948158>; Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar, eds., *The International Politics of Recognition* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

¹⁰ Noé Cornago, "On the Normalization of Sub-State Diplomacy," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 5, no. 1–2 (2010): 11–36, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191x-05010102>; Fiona McConnell, Terri Moreau, and Jason Dittmer, "Mimicking State Diplomacy: The Legitimizing Strategies of Unofficial Diplomacies," *Geoforum* 43, no. 4 (June 2012): 804–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.01.007>; Manuel Duran, "Paradiplomacy as a Diplomatic Broker: Between Separating Differences and Engaging Commonalities," *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* 1, no. 3 (June 6, 2016): 1–56, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24056006-12340003>.

¹¹ Geoff Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy: How States without "diplomatic Relations" Communicate* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994); James Ker-Lindsay and Eiki Berg, "Introduction: A Conceptual Framework for Engagement with de Facto States," *Ethnopolitics* 17, no. 4 (August 8, 2018): 335–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1495362>.

¹² Hans Kelsen, "Recognition in International Law," *American Journal of International Law* 35, no. 4 (October 1941): 605–17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2192561>.

implies a “government’s free decision to enter into a positive relationship with another state.”¹³ In this case, there is an impetus for this transition to take place, and a “decision would have to be made as to whether more intense and benign relations should be taken up.”¹⁴ This thesis theorizes the process of making this decision and acting on it subsequently to change a diplomatically abnormal relationship.

Empirically, the thesis is focused on US-China rapprochement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On the face of it, this makes for a strange choice. It is a historical period having received ample attention in the literature. There is an abundance of explanations, many of them driven by similar questions as those introduced in this thesis. How and why rapprochement came to be are puzzles that have been treated extensively. The problem, however, is that the answers to these questions construe rapprochement as *ill-suited for diplomatic analysis understood as a process of changing non-diplomatic relations to diplomatic ones*. This is so because most studies tend to speak the same language, that of realpolitik. For instance, it is argued that normalization came about due to geopolitical considerations, such as Washington’s interest in winding down US involvement in Vietnam,¹⁵ or Beijing’s need for balancing against the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Others claim that it was the Chinese leadership’s shift from ideology to pragmatism in foreign policy that paved the way towards rapprochement.¹⁷ The sense that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were *realists* is, however,

¹³ Axel Honneth, “Recognition between States: On the Moral Substrate of International Relations,” in *The International Politics of Recognition*, eds. Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 29.

¹⁴ Honneth, 28.

¹⁵ D. C. Watt, “American Foreign Policy After Vietnam,” *The Political Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (July 1973): 271–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.1973.tb02096.x>; Chris Connolly, “The American Factor: Sino-American Rapprochement and Chinese Attitudes to the Vietnam War, 1968–72,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (November 2005): 501–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740500284887>.

¹⁶ Robert A. Scalapino, “China and the Balance of Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 52, no. 2 (1974): 349, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20038054>.

¹⁷ For many observers, the advent of a more pragmatic international outlook does not mean that ideology is altogether dead in China. For more see Ronald C. Keith, “The Origins and Strategic Implications of China’s ‘Independent Foreign Policy,’” *International Journal* 41, no. 1 (1985): 95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40202352>.

meant to indicate that they registered in their calculus the tectonic shifts occurring across the geopolitical landscape in China's vicinity. The claim about the pragmatism of the Chinese leaders and the emphasis on the strategic logic of rapprochement are two sides of the same coin. Though appearing different at first sight, they are variations of the same basic theme. Evelyn Goh spells out that such is indeed the basic consensus in the literature:

“Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1972 has been indelibly associated with balance-of-power politics and its attendant assumption of a sudden, almost automatic realist reaction to structural changes from 1969 onward.”¹⁸

The equation of rapprochement with an effect of the structural influence attributed to the Soviet threat is unhelpful for the empirical ambition of this thesis. Because normalization is a process starting with a *political decision* to seek improved ties with an erstwhile enemy and concluding with the enactment of this decision, this is a highly *agentive* process. This implies that the final say over it lies with political actors, and their decision-making cannot be reduced to structural imperatives. If diplomatic activity “is not a world of necessity or inevitability [but] a world of choice, policy, decision,”¹⁹ it needs to be examined what kind of choices, policies, and decisions are made and how in the direction of diplomatic dialogue. Structural imperatives play a role in this deliberation only *via* interpretation and perception, and not by way of objective imposition. Equally importantly, the unfolding of rapprochement is not *descriptive* of a new state of affairs in the US-China relationship. It is not a response to changes taking place *beneath and prior to* it. Rapprochement is change itself, and it is constitutive of, rather than descriptive of, a new state of

¹⁸ Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From “Red Menace” to “Tacit Ally”* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

¹⁹ Robert Jackson, “Martin Wight’s Thought on Diplomacy,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 13, no. 4 (December 2002): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000351>.

affairs. Goh's seminal book quoted above is an outstanding example that explores rapprochement as a process of agentic change rather than as an outcome of structural change. It reconstructs the transformation of American meanings about China that make the case for rapprochement.²⁰ The problem is that the book takes for granted that these changes *within* US discourse were *possible to begin with*. This is an assumption that needs to be problematized. While Goh sought an answer to *why* rapprochement became necessary in the American perspective, she presents something of a level-playing field in discursive competition, implying that uploading *new* meanings about China was a straightforward endeavor. But if the abnormal state of affairs lasted for two decades between the US and the PRC after 1949, this recalibration of American China discourse was anything but straightforward. In answering the *how possible* question, this thesis focuses not just on the new American discourse about China, but on the *social-practical conditions* in which thinking about China in this way became possible. This is meant to address, then, how and why diplomatic normalization became necessary and possible between the US and the PRC.

²⁰ Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974*.

1.2. *A new framework of diplomatic normalization*

The thesis introduces a new framework of diplomatic normalization to help address the theoretical and empirical puzzles. Making the case for such a framework and identifying its necessary elements takes place during the first part of the thesis. It is argued that the process of how and why erstwhile enemies enter into diplomatic relations can be grasped in three distinct stages. The first is estrangement from the *status quo* (1). This entails problematizing the old state of affairs in which the absence of diplomatic relations is accepted in the bilateral relationship as a matter of course. The second is conceptualization of a new state of affairs (2). This entails articulating a new purpose of the relationship in which the turn to diplomatic relations becomes a desirable change. The third is enactment of diplomatic change (3). This entails implementing diplomatic relations in the form of diplomatic dialogue between erstwhile enemies. The thesis claims that diplomatic relations are established in this sequence, after the state of enmity is problematized, a new purpose is conceived that makes diplomatic relations necessary, and the two parties begin to embody it in diplomatic dialogue. Notwithstanding the absence of official recognition, diplomatic normalization can be said to have taken place at this stage.

In this thesis, the terms ‘necessity and possibility’ are used in two distinct senses, one *substantive*, the other *social-practical*. First, necessity in the substantive sense is about the *changing purposes* for which diplomatic mediation may or may not be deemed necessary in a particular relationship. It expresses why establishing diplomatic relations is desirable or not. Second, necessity in the social-practical sense is about the social conditions in which *deliberating about* these changing purposes is necessary. It expresses the social context in which it is necessary to think about diplomatic necessity substantively.

Possibility likewise lends itself to two interpretations. First, possibility in the substantive sense is about the *institutional conditions* required to establish diplomatic relations. It expresses the institutional and bureaucratic guarantees to be in place for diplomatic actors to implement diplomatic change. Second, possibility in the social-practical sense is about the social conditions in which deliberating about substantive necessity is possible. It expresses the context in which it is possible to think about diplomatic necessity substantively.

Accordingly, necessity can be articulated in terms of a why question, and possibility can be articulated in terms of a how question. Because these are used in both a substantive and a social-practical sense, there are two main research questions and four sub-questions. They are the following:

Research Question 1 –	Why is diplomacy necessary?
Sub-question 1a –	What are the substantive purposes making diplomatic relations necessary rather than unnecessary in a particular relationship?
Sub-question 1b –	What are the social-practical conditions in which deliberating over such purposes is necessary?
Research Question 2 –	How is diplomacy possible?
Sub-question 2a –	What are the institutional/bureaucratic conditions required for establishing diplomatic relations in a diplomatically abnormal relationship?
Sub-question 2b –	What are the social-practical conditions in which deliberating about the necessity of diplomatic relations is possible?

These questions inform the theoretical and empirical arguments put forward in the thesis. Some of them are specific to the context of the empirical case of US-China rapprochement, while others

can be answered in general theoretical terms. The argument breakdown below is to specify the role these questions play in animating the discussion in individual chapters.

1.3. Note on empirical argument and methodology

The methodological approach of this thesis is related to the nature of the empirical analysis. In particular, estrangement is taken as a methodological approach, not simply a stage of the analytical framework. The decision to reappraise US-China rapprochement has to do with this author's estrangement from the mainstream literature dealing with this historical period. This literature converges in claiming that normalization is reducible to a strategic entente between parties having recognized their need for each other in the presence of the looming Soviet threat. It is this entente that is problematized in this thesis. Two consequences follow from estrangement being a methodology in this thesis. The first is the necessity of *deconstructing* the narrative of a great convergence between the PRC and the US. It is to undo the narrative fixes whereby this literature *makes rapprochement cohere* in the context of a strategic entente. The second consequence is that the methodology of estrangement allows for a *social re-narrativizing* of rapprochement, not just a *de-narrativization* of it. In practice, the thesis estranges, or de-narrativizes, the strategic narrative as a theoretical narrative in chapter 5. Thereafter, it is re-narrativized as a social narrative in chapters 6 and 7. The objective of doing this exercise is not to reinscribe rapprochement in the totality of a theoretical narrative *other than the mainstream* narrative. The empirical ambition of this thesis is not to explain this historical period in an objective-causal way, to squeeze its alleged essence into an overarching theory. Instead, it is to demonstrate that while there is a strategic rationale underlying rapprochement, it is neither the kernel of a theoretical explanation, nor the description of the objective driver of this process. It is an American social narrative about China. To further specify the scope and limitations of the empirical argument deployed in this dissertation, the following clarifications are made. First, US-China rapprochement is reappraised with an overwhelming focus on the American side. In particular, chapter 6 analyzes changes in US foreign

policy under the Nixon-administration in the run-up to rapprochement. Doing so is meant to demonstrate that US foreign policy began to register a shift in its normative disposition in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with considerable implications for the conceivability of diplomatic normalization towards the People's Republic of China. A key author engendering this shift was National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. He invested in estranging the Wilsonian tradition dominating US foreign policy, and conceptualized realpolitik in its stead. Though this focus on the American side makes for an unbalanced treatment, the rationale for it lies in the nature of the diplomatic encounters themselves. What the empirical analysis shows in chapter 7 is that the challenge facing Henry Kissinger and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971 was unique. It was to converse against the backdrop of no prior personal exposure, with a plethora of substantive differences separating their two countries, all the while keeping in mind the historical singularity of the encounter and the premium put on finding some common ground. Their discussions in 1971 were antagonistic, the concepts they deployed lend themselves to different interpretations, and the purpose of the dialogue was uncertain. Eventually, the fundamental problem dominating the encounter turned into a matter of persuasion. It had to do with whether the Chinese Premier endorses Kissinger's notion that the American government is reliably committed to enacting those changes Zhou claims to be necessary for the bilateral relationship to normalize. In the end, they converged in accepting this point, notably that the Nixon-administration is able to *make a difference* in US policy. This was the primary agreement hammered out in these discussions, and this is what propelled the diplomatic dialogue forward.

The dissertation's reconstruction of the prior transformation of US foreign policy is significant in this context. It is through the practice of estrangement that Kissinger carves out a normative *tabula rasa* from which he negotiates with Zhou, and it is for Zhou to authenticate Kissinger's claim as

worthy of acceptance. But to appreciate this logic of the encounter, it is imperative to know of the distance Kissinger travels from traditional norms and practices in US foreign policy, from Wilsonian idealism in particular. His emphasis on construing with Zhou a new diplomatic understanding almost from scratch is predicated on this estrangement. This is what allows him to increase his agency in making common cause with the Chinese Premier, to be more forthcoming in meeting Zhou halfway. The unbalanced treatment evident in focusing on the American side makes sense for this reason. It helps account for why the encounter *itself is lopsided*, with Kissinger demonstrably bent on securing Zhou's approval rather than the other way around. Specifically, Kissinger's success depends on Zhou accepting an argument he had been nurturing for years: that the Nixon-administration constitutes a rupture in the history of US policy towards China.²¹ Chapter 6 accounts for the indispensable context in which the case for this rupture is made.

The second issue to clarify is related to the focus on diplomatic encounters. What difference does it make to study memoranda of conversations, the primary material used for the empirical analysis in chapter 7? What is the added value of reconstructing diplomatic meetings? Answering these questions involves both a methodological and a diplomatic explanation. The first, methodological, reason is that diplomatic activity is a joint endeavor. This means that its dynamic and substance are not exhaustible by the two sides' national interests formed prior to the meetings. Both parties come to the negotiating table with preconceptions and preferences of their own, but it is the speakers themselves that navigate their dialogue and form the actual stuff of the encounters. Because no one side is simply imposing its will on the other, the engagement is truly interactive,

²¹ In Kissinger's report to Nixon of his first, secret trip to China in July 1971, Kissinger claims that if the American government can master the process of dealing with the PRC, then "we will have made a revolution." The dissertation claims that in Kissinger's normative approach to the opening, this is to be understood quite literally. Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

and its outcome relational. Importantly, the methodological value of looking into memoranda of conversations is for this reason: to allow for a ‘real-time’ tracking of the way this common ground is identified, debated, and possibly agreed upon at the end.

The second, diplomatic, explanation has to do with the autonomous aspect of diplomatic activity. Sharp discusses this aspect while unpacking the idea of diplomatic culture.²² Diplomatic culture is often referenced as the pool of customs and practices accumulated over time and which professionals enact and reproduce in their undertakings. One example of this culture is the “talk-to-the-enemy” norm diplomatic writers claim to inhere in diplomacy but which is often ignored by governments.²³ For Sharp, however, the autonomy of diplomatic activity is more specific; it is essentially an encounter culture.²⁴ Culture is a repository of norms and rules accepted to guide behavior in a social activity. In turn, encounter refers to meeting with a stranger as if for the first time every time, and doing something together. So defined, ‘encounter culture’ verges on being an oxymoron. The necessity to arrive at common norms and rules could not be more pressing during first encounters, yet first encounters are also the most difficult social terrain for developing them. In these settings, Sharp claims that the encounter culture is evident if people seek

“not to reconcile differences between those they represented nor even to establish a common basis of understanding between them, but a way of conducting relations between peoples who maintain their own understandings intact.”²⁵

²² Paul Sharp, “The Idea of Diplomatic Culture and Its Sources,” in *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy*, ed. Hannah Slavik (Malta Geneva: DiploFoundation, 2004), 361–79.

²³ Geoffrey Wiseman, “Pax Americana: Bumping into Diplomatic Culture,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 4 (November 2005): 423, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3577.2005.00218.x>; Geoff Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy: How States without “diplomatic Relations” Communicate* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994).

²⁴ Sharp, “The Idea of Diplomatic Culture and Its Sources,” 371.

²⁵ Sharp, 373.

Encounter culture is at play as parties come to understand not the actual significance of certain practices of the other, but simply that *they are significant* in and of themselves. One example is wampum, or Iroquois, diplomacy in which the exchange of wampum belts played a key role. Importantly, this ritual came to be accepted as significant even though diplomats socialized in the European diplomatic tradition did not understand why.²⁶ Encounter culture is, then, being attuned to what is important for the other coming from a different lifeworld even as that lifeworld remains largely beyond grasp. It is to accept norms and rituals as consequential for diplomatic intercourse despite them being inscrutable. It is to *normalize*, to endorse as normal, that which is not normal for both parties.

In form, US-China diplomacy in the early 1970s is not like the encounters of European colonizers with strangers. Meetings between Kissinger and Zhou are reliably populated with norms that are mutually intelligible. Gifts are exchanged, social and cultural programs are held, dinners are shared, and negotiations are conducted. The participants accept these to be the ritual components making up their diplomatic experience. Yet, in substance, the analysis conducted in chapter 7 does reveal that encounter culture is at play. It is most evident when demands are put forward by one side, and the question is whether the other party accepts them as significant not because of substantive agreement, but because of a latent imperative that these first encounters *should pave the way towards re-encounters*. Since pioneering meetings are unfriendly terrain for reaching consensus over specific issues, the purpose is to identify a *deep structure* of bilateral engagement able to carry the conversation forward. Therefore, it is in these attempts that one can

²⁶ Morten Skumsrud Andersen and Iver B. Neumann, "Practices as Models: A Methodology with an Illustration Concerning Wampum Diplomacy," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40, no. 3 (June 2012): 457–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829812441848>.

“see the terms being worked out through which relations can be conducted with others, even when basic questions... have not been worked out.”²⁷

To paraphrase Rorty,²⁸ truth in diplomatic practice is what interlocutors let each other get away with saying. The other is a co-producer of this truth in acting as both an obstacle and a contributor. Therefore, what comes to be accepted as significant, or true, is a matter of negotiation informed by the encounter culture. One method to appreciate this autonomous aspect of diplomatic activity is to rely on textual evidence of diplomatic encounters. In this dissertation, this method is used to trace the interactive, and cumbersome, process of identifying a new, diplomatic understanding between representatives of the US and the PRC, even as they fail to bring about converge over matters of actual policy. This is the second, diplomatic, rationale for choosing the empirical material.

In chapter 7, the dissertation claims that the reports Kissinger submits to President Nixon of his trips to Beijing are not always borne out by the textual evidence. In other words, there is a distance between the substantive conversations and the way Kissinger reports them to Nixon. This is so because of Kissinger’s *double* estrangement. As a diplomat, he is having to mediate towards not simply Zhou, but towards Nixon, too. In making this claim, the dissertation risks creating an impression that there is an objective way to adjudicate between what is true and what is false based on the textual analysis. Fundamentally, the empirical analysis frames Kissinger’s reports to Nixon as an opportunity to *interpret the way Kissinger interprets his substantive discussions with Zhou*. This endeavor is not only meaningful and productive, it is also sound methodologically and in

²⁷ Sharp, “The Idea of Diplomatic Culture and Its Sources,” 372.

²⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–23.

terms of its underlying philosophy of social science. The following reasons are offered to defend this position.

First, the dissertation is informed by an interpretive sensibility that places the focus of scholarly inquiry on the “meaning of human experience,”²⁹ or, in a more precise statement, on the “meaning-making practices of contextually embedded human actors.”³⁰ Because people are “self-interpreting animals,”³¹ the social and political reality they come to have is a function of the meanings they construe. Furthermore, human actors are contextually embedded, implying that these meanings are contingent rather than fixed, and intersubjective rather than subjective. That is, interpretations are not the exclusive properties of individuals; they belong to larger discourses and epistemic communities that guide “the proper construction of reality.”³² Second, making intelligible the behavior of these actors is possible only if the indeterminacy of language is made pride of place in the analysis. Following the linguistic turn in the social sciences, including in IR,³³ language does not simply describe, or refer to, the world in an objective way. Rather, language is the very locus of meaning construction. At the level of action, this means that human agents refer to particular categories of thought to make sense of their social environment, and, in doing so, they rely on meanings pregnant with agency, identity, and other aspects of social behavior. At the level of observation, it is the interpretation of these meanings construed on the ground that forms the basis of knowledge production in social inquiry. Because what is interpreted is inevitably an “already

²⁹ Cecelia Lynch, *Interpreting International Politics*, Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

³⁰ Xymena Kurowska, “Interpretive Scholarship in Contemporary International Relations,” *Teoria Polityki*, no. 4 (2020): 94, <https://doi.org/10.4467/25440845TP.19.018.11784>.

³¹ Charles Taylor quoted in Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely, “Why Political Science Is an Ethical Issue,” *Political Studies* 66, no. 2 (May 2018): 428, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717723503>.

³² Andreas Antoniadou, “Epistemic Communities, Epistemes and the Construction of (World) Politics,” *Global Society* 17, no. 1 (January 2003): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0953732032000053980>.

³³ Iver B. Neumann, “Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 2002): 627–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298020310031201>.

interpreted social world,”³⁴ it is precisely the interplay between the level of action and level of observation that is of utmost importance.

To properly assess the interpretive dynamics at each level, the hermeneutic circle is employed. Hermeneutics is a philosophical tradition focusing on the interpretation of how cultural and social artifacts come to be imbued with meaning.³⁵ It is concerned with the way meanings are invested in material expressions like texts and other artifacts, or “text-analogues.”³⁶ Human actors are responsible for interpreting these objects, and this activity is contingent on “personal background, the history of the times, other associated or contrasting texts, or something else.”³⁷ Therefore, it is only in this larger social and historical context that one can appreciate what kind of meanings are deployed and why. This means that though there is room for agency in interpretation, this process is neither arbitrary nor exclusive to the interpreter’s personal fancy.

At the level of action, the dissertation frames Kissinger’s reporting to Nixon as a key interpretive investment whereby the trips to Beijing *come to be imbued with an overarching meaning for US foreign policy*. This framing takes for granted that the memoranda of conversations are not inherently meaningful. There is no objective truth to them that the naked eye would be able to decipher. These documents help retrace the substantive deliberations of the participants, but the question of what the trips actually mean for American policy is a matter of interpretation. Kissinger applies himself to this question in the reports. In doing so, he relies on an *a priori* conceptualization of American realpolitik. He implicitly mobilizes and draws on a host of previous interpretations,

³⁴ Stefano Guzzini, “A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 2 (June 2000): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066100006002001>.

³⁵ Dvora Yanow, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences,” in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, 2. ed (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2014), 15–17.

³⁶ Yanow, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences,” 15.

³⁷ Yanow, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences,” 16.

rendering his sense-making endeavor inevitably intertextual.³⁸ At the same time, Kissinger also cannot *fix* his meaning of US-China diplomacy once and for all. His utterance is not uncontestable, but in the historical context in which rapprochement is embedded, his reading of the situation is pregnant with the particular intentionality of American diplomacy towards the PRC. This makes his interpretation *contextually authoritative*, forcing the analysis to focus on his articulation. Furthermore, due to the nexus between knowledge and power, and because power is an “indicator of the ‘possible’,”³⁹ the reports to Nixon define the parameters for subsequent diplomatic behavior towards China. The reports help bring out how this particular knowledge of China is construed.

The hermeneutic sensibility is helpful at the level of observation, too. It directs attention to the difficulty entailed in interpreting the interpretations of human actors for the sake of scholarly knowledge. To begin with, the distance between the textual evidence of the diplomatic encounters and Kissinger’s reports is not accidental, it is inevitable. The memoranda are no more than an artifact in need of interpretive expression, and the reports are the loci in which this expression is initially articulated. In juxtaposing the two types of texts, the following principles of interpretation are employed. First, there is a back-and-forth of reading between the memoranda and the reports. The hermeneutic approach impresses that each text is intelligible as part of a larger set of texts, but also that this larger set of texts can only be understood by reference to its parts.⁴⁰ In the memorandum-report binary, the latter is the *con-text* in which the former acquires its meaning. Second, the explicit intention of this author is to identify and track *slippages of meaning* with which to spell out the substantive distance between report and memorandum. These slippages are

³⁸ This intertextuality is another reason to explore changes in normative disposition in US foreign policy prior to rapprochement. There is no way to make sense of Kissinger’s sense-making process in the reports unless his prior discursive investment in *realpolitik* is properly understood.

³⁹ Guzzini, “A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations,” 172.

⁴⁰ Yanow, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences,” 15.

detectable, in particular, when the claims Kissinger puts forward in the report are divorced from the position Zhou takes in the discussions. Put differently, this distance is to be concretized in Kissinger's expression of China's foreign policy as congruent with a *realpolitik* understanding, despite Zhou's demonstrable resistance to such convergence over matters of policy. It is this (dis-)connection, then, that can be made explicit with a hermeneutic approach. In doing so, the argument is not that Kissinger seems to have missed in his reports the *truth* of his discussions with Zhou, for this very truth is the subject of subsequent construction. But because the reports are built on Kissinger's *reported speech* of what Zhou said in Beijing, it is possible to use Zhou's responses as benchmarks for validating Kissinger's characterization of the talks. Therefore, it is the problematization of the relationship between Zhou's literal statements, on the one hand, and Kissinger's diplomatic articulation of them in the language of *realpolitik*, that forms the cornerstone of the empirical argument. This is, then, the philosophical and methodological considerations informing the analysis in chapter 7.

1.4. Thesis structure and argument overview

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of classical and post-classical (critical) approaches to diplomacy with a focus on the necessity of diplomatic dialogue. It is claimed that both traditions interpret necessity in terms of a normative ideal, but neither of them can account for why diplomatic dialogue becomes necessary in some contexts but not in others. Classical scholars are committed to the systemic purpose of coexistence, framing diplomacy as an institution emerging in response to this systemic need. They also claim that diplomacy is a particular practice that makes other state practices possible. Post-classical scholars shift away from the state-centric view and reappraise diplomacy as the mediation of difference in everyday social contexts. Their primary concern is to establish a critical diplomatic ethos whereby differences between self and other are mediated reflexively and sustainably.

Chapter 3 approaches diplomacy as a practice, and explores the relational and practice turns in social inquiry and IR. This is necessary to explore diplomacy as a social-practical activity, rather than as a response to imperatives at the system or the state level. The discussion finds that while practices lend themselves to permanence as well as change, the way in which stabilized practices undergo transformation is poorly understood. The chapter introduces the concept of yoking by reliance on the work of Chicago school sociologist Andrew Abbott. Yoking is a social mechanism whereby a practice *coheres* by reference to an accepted meaning. It entails the drawing of boundaries of difference as if they pertain to a particular social entity. This is key for understanding the process of how and why erstwhile enemies establish diplomatic relations. It implies that a diplomatically abnormal state of affairs needs to be *unyoked*, its practical purpose problematized, and a new one yoked in its stead that makes diplomatic relations desirable. Yoking allows for an agentic intervention in the old state of affairs in bilateral diplomacy.

Chapter 4 concludes the conceptual overview with a detour on the concepts of the stranger and strangership. This is necessary to investigate the conditions in which the yoking and re-yoking of practical purposes is more, rather than less, likely. The chapter argues that if yoking is an agentic intervention, then it is triggered if existing practices are estranged rather than embraced as normal and ordinary. This estrangement happens in the social distance that is the hallmark of the stranger. This social distance is at the disposal of diplomats because they are, too, strangers acting in an official capacity. The chapter concludes with introducing the analytical framework and discussing its three stages – estrangement, conceptualization, enactment.

Chapter 5 discusses the mainstream literature on US-China rapprochement. The purpose of doing so is to contest the notion that realpolitik is either a theoretical explanation of rapprochement, or the objective substance of a new Chinese foreign policy in the late 1960s. The chapter claims that realpolitik is simply the kernel of a new strategic rationale rooted in the discourse of the Nixon-administration. This discourse revolves around the idea of China as a normal, rational power. Realpolitik is, therefore, a *social narrative* that emanates from the social context particular to the Nixon-administration.

Chapter 6 draws out the process whereby this social narrative comes into existence. This chapter corresponds to the stages of estrangement and conceptualization. It is argued that the Nixon-administration's social environment is defined by a normative-institutional estrangement from thinking about, as well as practicing, American foreign policy. These *un-American* thoughts and practices were conducive for expressing China's identity in terms congruent with an American interest in rapprochement. In practice, the Nixon-Kissinger leadership imagined that the concern with the international order is a commonality between American self and Chinese other because both of them spoke the language of realpolitik.

Chapter 7 analyzes the pioneering diplomatic encounters between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai during the July and October trips to China in 1971. These encounters demonstrate that though diplomatic dialogue is enacted at this stage, its specific purpose in the relationship is yet to be negotiated. This is a difficult process full of arguments, dissonances, and misunderstandings. The chapter also analyzes the reports Kissinger submitted to Nixon following each of the two trips. This analysis shows that Kissinger not so much reports what Zhou says, he *translates* it to Nixon in the language of *realpolitik*. This means that *realpolitik* is a symbolic conduit through which Kissinger expresses the similarity of the PRC with the US. In doing so, Kissinger becomes a mediator *par excellence*, articulating the necessity of dialogue with the Beijing government.

In chapter 8, the thesis concludes by meditating over the dilemma of difference versus similarity between self and other, and the implications of this dilemma for diplomatic normalization. It is claimed that notwithstanding its role in propelling normalization, the similarity between China and the US identified by the Nixon-administration worked by enforcing an authoritative interpretation by the American self onto the Chinese other. The Nixon-administration's conception of China led to the abrogation of the state of enmity and the embracing of dialogue, but this very conception worked according to a *colonizing logic* whereby genuine Chinese difference was denied. The chapter concludes by summarizing the theoretical and empirical arguments, the contributions they make, the limitations they have, and further empirical applications for the framework to explore.

Part I.
Towards an Analytical Framework of Diplomatic
Normalization

2. Classical and Post-Classical Approaches to Diplomacy

2.1. Introduction

This thesis is interested in diplomatic normalization in a particular historical case. It seeks to answer two questions. The first is why diplomacy is necessary, the second is how diplomacy is possible. This thesis argues that diplomatic normalization happens if it is both necessary and possible in a particular relationship. The condition of necessity means that there is a purpose for which diplomacy is used, whereas the condition of possibility implies that actors need to be able to deliberate over this necessity as well as to *act on* this understanding in the relationship. If diplomats “wield the power to make relations,” and this power comes about “not before the actors’ interactions but through diplomatic engagement,” then the main question is with the process through which this engagement becomes necessary and possible.⁴¹

The necessity and possibility of diplomacy have been explored in the literature on diplomacy. In this chapter, the classical and post-classical approaches to diplomacy are surveyed with a threefold objective. First, it is to demonstrate that classical approaches think about diplomatic necessity in ways that can be clustered into two interpretations. The first is the social/societal, the second is the organic/systemic. The first meaning is rooted in the English School tradition of appraising diplomacy as the primary institution of international society, and whose purpose is to assist in the maintenance of international order. The other meaning is rooted in classical writers’ insistence that diplomacy is a self-evident tool employed to manage relations between sovereign nation-states.

The second purpose is to discuss the possibility of diplomacy in post-classical approaches. These approaches focus on how diplomatic mediation can be *sustainable*. Sustainability means a constant

⁴¹ Corneliu Bjola, “Understanding Enmity and Friendship in World Politics: The Case for a Diplomatic Approach,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 8, no. 1 (2013): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341242>.

monitoring of the reasons making mediation necessary in a relationship. This constant monitoring helps sort out those reasons that render it desirable and those that make it unnecessary. This monitoring is possible if actors involved in a relationship are *reflexive*. It is argued that reflexivity emphasized in the postclassical literature corresponds to the condition of possibility in this thesis. It is what makes possible an ongoing deliberation over diplomatic necessity.

The third purpose is to demonstrate that the classical and the post-classical literatures are useful despite their limitations for the task at hand in this thesis. The necessity of diplomacy in the classical literature is tied either to the systemic purpose of coexistence,⁴² or to the indispensability of diplomacy in making other state practices possible.⁴³ The issue is that these imperatives take on a transhistorical and acontextual quality.⁴⁴ The portrait they paint of diplomacy is of a practice that tends to be triggered as a matter of course. In this thesis, however, the focus is on diplomatic normalization, and this is a process of change. It is concerned with why and how a relationship of no diplomatic dialogue transforms in a way that diplomatic dialogue becomes necessary as well as possible. For understanding this process, the value of classical notions of necessity is limited.

The post-classical approaches fare better in their usefulness. Their insistence on reflexivity in making diplomatic mediation sustainable shows an explicit concern with the possibility of diplomacy. The issue is that the post-classical interpretation of possibility tends to be inseparable from an ethics of alterity. The reflexivity through which reasons for mediation are monitored is

⁴² Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, "Bull's Conception of International Society," in *Hedley Bull on International Society*, eds. Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000), 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62666-3_1.

⁴³ The frequent reference to state *self-preservation* is a case in point in this regard. See James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford, OX, UK; New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1987), 111.

⁴⁴ That diplomacy has a "transhistorical, or perhaps ahistorical, character" is also noted by Pigman. See Geoffrey Allen Pigman, *Contemporary Diplomacy: Representation and Communication in a Globalized World* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 202.

associated with a critical diplomatic ethos, a responsible nurturing of difference between self and other in diplomacy. In doing so, post-classical approaches tend to express reflexive deliberations in terms of ethical choices. The thesis claims that this is an unnecessary limitation. While it accepts reflexivity as the condition of diplomatic possibility, it rejects its narrowing down to a framing of diplomatic mediation as *the morally responsible thing to do*. The thesis seeks to cast its net wider by considering any political understanding that makes the case for the necessity of diplomatic normalization.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first part offers a critical review of classical theories of diplomacy by rearranging them around the question of diplomatic necessity. In doing so, it shows that the turn to diplomacy tends to be framed as self-evident, commonsensical, and natural. In addition, it discusses two meanings of necessity, the social/societal and the organic/systemic, around which classical interpretations can be clustered. The second part is focused on post-classical approaches and the role reflexivity plays in sustaining diplomatic mediation. In doing so, the discussion shows that reflexivity as diplomatic possibility is rooted in an ethical understanding of diplomatic necessity, an interconnection that is limiting from the perspective of diplomatic normalization. The third part concludes by discussing the ways in which the analytical framework of diplomatic normalization can both draw on and depart from the wealth of knowledge offered by the classical and post-classical literatures.

2.2. *The classical approach to diplomacy and the question of diplomatic necessity*

Classical theories of diplomacy are notable for their reliance on the so-called recognition assumption, as well as for their normative commitment to the *status quo* in world politics. The former refers to the practice of starting scholarly inquiry by taking for granted that the units of analysis are recognized states, whereas the latter implies a kind of theorizing whose objective is dedicated to stabilizing the international order.⁴⁵ Both of these characteristics appear in classical theorizing of diplomacy, and though they are significant *a priori* filters, they make sense in the classical understanding of international order.⁴⁶ The purpose of the following review is to introduce the classical interpretation of diplomatic necessity and to point out its theoretical blindspots.

The classical canon is a home that accommodates many a diverse contributor. Belonging to it are writers like Ernest Satow,⁴⁷ Harold Nicolson,⁴⁸ and José Calvet de Magalhães,⁴⁹ each of whom had been professional diplomats before they articulated in a theoretical language their respective experiences. Appearing besides them are English School authors like Adam Watson,⁵⁰ Hedley Bull,⁵¹ and Martin Wight.⁵² Their interest follows not from their individual circumstances but from their appreciation of diplomacy as the primary scaffolding of international order. Though different in their approaches, what classical writers have in common is that they take for granted, first, that

⁴⁵ In Lawson's definition, international orders are "regularized practices of exchange among discrete political units that recognize each other to be independent." John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 8th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 40.

⁴⁶ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

⁴⁷ Ernest Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, 4th ed. (The University Press Glasgow, 1957).

⁴⁸ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1939).

⁴⁹ José Calvet de Magalhães, *The Pure Concept of Diplomacy*, Contributions in Political Science, Global Perspectives in History and Politics, no. 214 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁵¹ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*.

⁵² Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, 1st ed. (Harvard University Press, 1966).

sovereign states are irreducibly diverse, and, second, that each of them seeks to survive by conserving their own respective differences. These are considered to be inescapable facts of international life. They generate an anarchical setting in which the dilemma is “of living separately and wanting to do so, while having to conduct relations with others.”⁵³ For the classical canon, the answer to this challenge lies in *coexistence*, the so-called systemic purpose for which the international order is maintained. Therefore, what is imputed to all members of the international order, by virtue of their sheer existence, is that they act for the sake of “self-preservation in an alien environment.”⁵⁴ This can be called the bare minimum of *raison d'états*,⁵⁵ as the pursuit of any other national interest is by necessity secondary to the primary objective of preserving the health and strength of the state.⁵⁶ Classical authors accept that diplomacy is an adequate instrument to secure these purposes. This leads to a confirmation bias in the classical focus. States that exist do so because they are already successfully engaged in interstate diplomacy.

Sovereign states engaging in the diplomatic practice allows for the performance of tasks necessary for such classical tasks as diplomatic representation, system maintenance and conflict resolution. Ringmar identifies such a connection between the birth of international society and sovereign states extending mutual recognition:

⁵³ Paul Sharp, “For Diplomacy: Representation and the Study of International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (June 1999): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00140>.

⁵⁴ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 111.

⁵⁵ *Raison d'état*, or reason of the state, is a French expression coined in the 17th century, which denotes the political reasons for which a particular state acts. It also implies a close association between the means of foreign policy and the ends for which those means are applied. In its most popular formulation, the “interests of the state justify the means used to pursue them.” Gérald Sfez, *Les doctrines de la raison d'Etat* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000), 28.

⁵⁶ Meinecke's famous formulation captures this idea: “*Raison d'État* is the fundamental principle of national conduct, the State's first Law of Motion. It tells the statesman what he must do to preserve the health and strength of the State.” Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'État and Its Place in Modern History*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 1.

“[I]t was through practices of recognition, affirming sameness, and through practices of non-recognition, affirming difference, that international society came to constitute itself as such.”⁵⁷

Those that recognize one another are shared by a common will to communicate among themselves,⁵⁸ and in so doing, they achieve more than simply the condition of self-preservation. In the words of Buzan,

“[t]he basic idea of international society is thus quite simple: just as human beings live in societies which they both shape and are shaped by, so also states live in an international society which they shape and are shaped by.”⁵⁹

Diplomacy is precisely that which socially glues states in a way that order prevails at the systemic level, producing a society of states not despite, but because of, anarchy.⁶⁰

The supposition of states’ readiness to talk with each other is always present in classical and English School theorizing. While the latter approaches diplomacy as a primary institution of international society,⁶¹ the former eulogizes diplomacy by arguing that its existence is practically *reasonable*. Because many different nation-states are at loggerheads with one another, with each seeking to preserve its own way of life, diplomacy is “commonsensical.”⁶² The adjective implies that it is “most conducive to the maintenance of peaceful relations.”⁶³ Brought about by a

⁵⁷ Erik Ringmar, “Recognition and the Origins of International Society,” *Global Discourse* 4, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 447, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.917031>.

⁵⁸ Christer Jonsson and Martin Hall, “Communication: An Essential Aspect of Diplomacy,” *International Studies Perspectives* 4, no. 2 (May 2003): 195–210, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.402009>.

⁵⁹ Barry Buzan, “The English School: An Underexploited Resource in IR,” *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 477.

⁶⁰ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*.

⁶¹ Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society?: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161–95.

⁶² Harold Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase 1919-1925, A Study in Post-War Diplomacy* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1934), 406.

⁶³ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 144.

functional inevitability, diplomacy has developed *via* the “reasonable bargaining of man with man.”⁶⁴ Classical approaches share in the notion that diplomacy is not simply necessary, but that its necessity is beyond questioning in a functioning international order. Diplomacy’s double imperative, therefore, consists of its utility for states’ self-preservation, and its role as the basic scaffolding of international society.

Beyond these functionalities, the classical canon is notable for producing substantive accounts of diplomacy, identifying what is the ideal-typical diplomacy and the desirable qualities to be possessed by professional diplomats. Sir Ernest Satow’s definition is as well-known as it is shared by many of his followers:

“Diplomacy is the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states,” or, in a much shorter form, “the conduct of business between states by peaceful means.”⁶⁵

While approving of Satow,⁶⁶ Harold Nicolson claims that diplomacy is “an essential element in any reasonable relations between man and man and between nation and nation,”⁶⁷ adding that it is an atemporal institution “in the sense of the ordered conduct of relations between one group of human beings and another group alien to themselves.”⁶⁸ Herbert Butterfield concurs by adding that many centuries’ experience produced a “ripe kind of wisdom” with a “permanent validity” with regards to the conduct of foreign policy through diplomacy.⁶⁹ Therefore, classical formulations

⁶⁴ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 51.

⁶⁵ Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, 4.

⁶⁶ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 227.

⁶⁷ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 14.

⁶⁸ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 17.

⁶⁹ Herbert Butterfield, “The New Diplomacy and Historical Diplomacy,” in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, eds. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, 1st ed. (Harvard University Press, 1966), 183.

tend to be couched in a language of timeless universality and a quality of reasonableness. They present diplomacy not just in objective terms, as an institutional reaction to the necessity of mediation, but also as a normatively desirable form of interstate practice.

This functionalist logic is most explicit, as surveyed above, in the classical canon's association of diplomacy with the key task of *system maintenance*. In this vein, Hamilton and Langhorne argue that diplomacy is what renders intelligible a global order established on the basis of a Westphalian states system.⁷⁰ Because of a plurality of independent nation-states, some regular form of active mediation is required to manage differences. As everything that happens 'outside' may influence what happens on the inside, the classical argument is that members of the international order *cannot* afford to observe each other from a distance. Under conditions of anarchy, in which interstate disputes are not solvable by reference to a higher authority, such passivity is counterproductive.⁷¹ Rather, because states confront each other while pursuing their national interests, diplomacy becomes a platform upon which peaceful attempts at mutual accommodation are possible. In the words of Keens-Soper,

“[i]f the arrangements of diplomacy are to work, compromise – the disposition to compromise – is essential. The dictates of ‘true’ interest declare a permanent stake in moderate behaviour.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, “Diplomacy Transformed and Transcended,” in *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory, and Administration*, eds. Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 264.

⁷¹ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 14, 56.

⁷² Maurice Keens-Soper, “François de Callières and Diplomatic Theory,” *The Historical Journal* 16, no. 3 (1973): 503.

Carried out individually at the level of nation-states, diplomacy subsequently feeds into a particular outcome at the systemic level. This reveals that diplomacy, in the classical understanding, is both an effect of the anarchical setting as well as its primary condition of reproduction.

From a historical perspective, it was indeed the challenges of anarchy and hegemony in the 18th and 19th centuries that provided the structural context in which the diplomatic tradition was born. Diplomacy came about as “the collective and reflexive embodiment of the states’ ultimate task – self-preservation in an alien environment.”⁷³ Der Derian’s treatment of the classical diplomatic paradigm is noteworthy for its emphasis on the intertwinement of state power and diplomatic culture. For Der Derian, these two phenomena emerge interdependently

“when mutually estranged and formally equal states constitute a system, in which the universalization, secularization, and normalization of power, support one another reciprocally and act mutually as particular means to a systemic end.”⁷⁴

In other words, there *has* to be an overarching purpose, classically equated with coexistence, for diplomacy to become necessary in the practice of independent states. Once this is the case, and there is a discernable “pattern or disposition of international activity” to sustain a set of shared objectives,⁷⁵ international order is achieved. These goals, the “statics of international order” in Hedley Bull’s vocabulary, are those through which coexistence is realized. Preserving the system and society of states, on the one hand, and maintaining state independence and sovereignty, peace, and the limitation of violence, on the other, are two sides of the same coin.⁷⁶

⁷³ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 111.

⁷⁴ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 127.

⁷⁵ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 16.

⁷⁶ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 16–19.

The triangle of system maintenance, national interest and diplomacy does not, however, always lend itself to a straightforward operation. One issue historically posing a challenge is, in particular, the relationship between revolutionary states and the international order.⁷⁷ The problem in this relationship consists in one country's *raison d'état* being predicated on the negation of another state's existence. If *raison d'état* means that the "interests of the state justify the means used to pursue them,"⁷⁸ then the relevance of diplomacy as a particular means ultimately depends on the interests being pursued. The substance of foreign policy, "whose objective is to achieve a certain result vis-à-vis another or group of states,"⁷⁹ is of particular significance in such cases. If diplomacy is necessary because all state accept that living by each other peacefully is the only way for each to survive, then its functional necessity is muted when foreign policy is no longer compatible with the systemic purpose of coexistence.

Because the theoretical significance classical authors impute to diplomatic dialogue takes primacy, they are ill-equipped to accommodate such anomalies and work out their implications for analysis. If there is a state lingering at the margins of the international order, its predicament may be rooted in its being diplomatically unrecognized and/or otherwise isolated. Such a situation can come about if the foreign policy pursued by this outsider state is perceived to be incompatible with the *raison de système*, or the main purpose underpinning the existence of the international order.⁸⁰ For the outsider state, this conflict can come about because it views the systemic purpose to be

⁷⁷ For more on this relationship see Fred Halliday, "'The Sixth Great Power': On the Study of Revolution and International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 16, no. 3 (July 1990): 207–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500112471>; J. D Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); George Lawson, *Anatomies of Revolution* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁷⁸ Gérald Sfez, *Les doctrines de la raison d'État* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000), 28.

⁷⁹ Magalhães, *The Pure Concept of Diplomacy*, 7.

⁸⁰ Cornago claims that in Watson's portrayal, in particular, diplomacy itself is the *raison de système*. See Noé Cornago, *Plural Diplomacies: Normative Predicaments and Functional Imperatives*, *Diplomatic Studies* 8 (Leiden; Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013), 48.

predicated on a denial of its own existence. Since classical diplomacy plays a vital institutional role in maintaining the international order, the outsider state is more likely to reject its tools, rather than to accept and employ them.

The kind of states often isolated throughout history by the international society are, as alluded to above, those of a revolutionary character. Because they consider it their right as well as obligation to alter “social and political relations in other states,”⁸¹ revolutionary diplomatic practice is known for its *intrusive* and *all-encompassing* character. The relationship between a revolutionary state and the international society tends to be antagonistic because each side works to change the other. For a revolutionary state, the guarantee of its own existence is seen in the revolutionary conversion of other states, whereas the international society likewise expects the revolutionary state to shed its revolutionary aspirations. Halliday claims that such conflict is sustained unless homogeneity is re-imposed, and the domestic social and political orders of revolutionary and non-revolutionary regimes finally overlap.⁸² By intervening in the domestic affairs of foreign countries to harmonize systems of governance according to a revolutionary template, these states overlook the distinction between the internal and external spheres of state action. Having no regard for this divide constitutes a serious breach of a key principle of classical diplomacy, for *coexistence* assumes that diplomacy is meant precisely to conserve, and not to *efface*, differences in internal characteristics. Because a revolutionary state sees the guarantee of its own existence in the conversion of other states, the diplomacy it employs is the servant of an *anti-diplomatic* cause.⁸³ It is also for this reason that most revolutionary states tend not to want to join the prevailing international order.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Halliday, “The Sixth Great Power,” 214.

⁸² Halliday, “The Sixth Great Power,” 216.

⁸³ Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy*.

⁸⁴ Robert Jervis, “Socialization, Revolutionary States and Domestic Politics,” *International Politics* 52, no. 5 (September 2015): 610, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2015.23>.

In such a setting, international order does not endure organically from the interactions of like units seeking to secure their respective national interests. Nor is it tenable any longer that diplomacy is inherently immune to being abused. To produce order at the systemic level, great powers assume a special role,⁸⁵ as they register “the realities of the situation” and broker over moments of disturbance with the potential to upset the status quo.⁸⁶ The concept of national interest is too restrictive and myopic for that purpose. Instead, great powers are expected to be guided by an “enlightened self-interest,”⁸⁷ or a mélange of *raison d'état* as well as *raison de système*. With the requisite appreciation of both reasons, they act not just on their own but on behalf of the entire community of states.⁸⁸ Because an international order is a social order, which operates when expectations “about when and how actors will engage in cooperation or conflict” are settled,⁸⁹ great powers use *raison de système* to assess the needs of the international order and to manage those expectations through diplomacy.⁹⁰ This is nothing short of a delicate task.⁹¹ Their awareness of the *raison de système* cannot entail the accommodation of any and all “demands of states unrelated to their power.”⁹² Though Watson concedes that appeasement “is in the true spirit of diplomacy,”⁹³ great powers are to differentiate between instances when reasonable concessions are necessary,

⁸⁵ Astrov details the problems having to do with the different conceptualizations of great power management in the English School literature. Alexander Astrov, “Great Power Management: English School Meets Governmentality?,” in *System, Society and the World: Exploring the English School of International Relations*, ed. Robert W Murray, 2015, 111–16.

⁸⁶ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 55; André Géraud, “Diplomacy, Old and New,” *Foreign Affairs* 23, no. 2 (1945): 256–70.

⁸⁷ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 205.

⁸⁸ Watson, 215.

⁸⁹ Robert F. Trager, *Diplomacy: Communication and the Origins of International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 7.

⁹⁰ Alexander Astrov, ed., *The Great Power (Mis)Management: The Russian-Georgian War and Its Implications for Global Political Order* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

⁹¹ Furthermore, great powers have not always assumed their great responsibilities. Such variation depended on the historical period in question, and on the composition and membership of the great powers. Chris Brown, “Do Great Powers Have Great Responsibilities? Great Powers and Moral Agency,” *Global Society* 18, no. 1 (January 2004): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360082032000173545>.

⁹² Watson, *Diplomacy*, 54.

⁹³ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 67.

and those when demands of illegitimate proportions need to be rejected. At the same time, great powers also cannot, in the name of conserving the *status quo* and their own preeminent positions, suppress whatever challenge is posed against it. Unless mediated efficiently through diplomacy, it is precisely ignorance towards legitimate demands that risks destroying the fabric of international society. Great powers thus not only lay down the codes of international conduct “in the interests of international society as a whole,” but are willing to act whenever the “effective functioning of their system and of international society” is being threatened.⁹⁴

Therefore, the classical approach is focused on an ideal international order that is functionally and institutionally intact. Deviant cases, characterized by a diplomatically exceptional and *abnormal* relationship between an outsider state and the rest of the international society, are mostly left outside of consideration. Whatever anomaly presents itself on occasion, its resolution is delivered by the great managers of the international order. The absence of further theorization in this regard is unsurprising for the following reasons. First, classical authors demonstrated a preference for the status quo, both *in the literature and in the world*. This means that their attention to diplomacy is wedded to the purpose of system maintenance, and that cases in which an outsider state shows resistance against that purpose have been seen as largely exceptional and unworthy of theoretical attention. Second, many classical authors served as professional diplomats, and thus the theories they produce of their craft reflect their own individual experiences. These Kissingeresque “folk-models,”⁹⁵ or the “narrative storytelling of diplomatic historians,” continue to dominate the

⁹⁴ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 203.

⁹⁵ Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann, “The Future of Diplomacy: Changing Practices, Evolving Relationships,” *International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 66, no. 3 (September 2011): 532, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070201106600301>.

classical canon.⁹⁶ These models construe diplomacy as a category of practice instead of analysis, to be used unreflexively in a deductive-prescriptive fashion.⁹⁷ Third, because they are concerned about how things should be in international politics rather than how they are, classical authors have tended to refrain from producing empirically applied analysis. Referring to the banality, indeed theoretical sterility, of classical diplomatic studies, Murray noted how these approaches are “replete with consensual theoretical assumptions and generalizations.”⁹⁸ Produced by practitioners and diplomatic historians, classical theories were not “much interested in theoretical and conceptual development.”⁹⁹

The classical theory is also a conservative, or problem-solving,¹⁰⁰ theory of diplomacy. The answer to why diplomacy is necessary is readily contained in the systemic assumption of coexistence.¹⁰¹ Classical scholars place a normative premium on professional diplomacy as a must-have scaffolding, a “principle of order,”¹⁰² that underpins the international system because the purpose of coexistence is held as an article of faith. Canonizing a “traditional teleology” according to which diplomacy should be employed and theorized about, classical scholars “demonstrated a conservative preference for the status quo in international politics” and in the literature of

⁹⁶ Benno Teschke and Steffan Wyn-Jones, “Marxism in Foreign Policy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, by Benno Teschke and Steffan Wyn-Jones (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.372>.

⁹⁷ Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann, “Introduction,” in *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, eds. Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316162903.001>.

⁹⁸ Stuart Murray et al., “The Present and Future of Diplomacy and Diplomatic Studies: Diplomacy and Diplomatic Studies: Present and Future,” *International Studies Review* 13, no. 4 (December 2011): 720, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2011.01079.x>.

⁹⁹ Bjola, “Understanding Enmity and Friendship in World Politics,” 3.

¹⁰⁰ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (June 1981): 126–55.

¹⁰¹ This also explains why the English School’s engagement with diplomacy has been limited. In part because it does not approach diplomacy as a social practice, its vision of international society is that of “a less malleable and reflective phenomenon.” Iver B. Neumann, “The English School on Diplomacy: Scholarly Promise Unfulfilled,” *International Relations* 17, no. 3 (September 2003): 364, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178030173006>.

¹⁰² Keens-Soper, “François de Callières and Diplomatic Theory,” 508.

diplomacy.¹⁰³ The classical picture of diplomats likewise confirms the value of preservation. As “men of the status quo,” they go against the “mentalité of the modern age” by acting to conserve relations in the sea of incessant change.¹⁰⁴ Prudence and cautiousness are outstanding values in professional diplomats because they apply themselves to *keeping things as they are*, rather than as they should be in international relations. Summarizing the classical view of diplomats, Sofer wrote that

“the good diplomat is the courtier of civilization by being a symbol of peace, a custodian of public virtues, and the flag bearer of the practices of a functional and civilized international society.”¹⁰⁵

Above all, these attributes find their ultimate expression in the classical expectation that sovereign states, with little to no exception, talk to one another through diplomacy. At the end of his book, Watson concludes that the “the most necessary lesson is that the diplomatic dialogue itself should be continuous.”¹⁰⁶ Richelieu’s well-known adage captures this idea even more emphatically, with the 17th century French Cardinal insisting that states

“must negotiate ceaselessly, either openly or secretly, in all places, even in those from which no present fruits are reaped and still more in those for which no future prospects as yet seem likely.”¹⁰⁷

Regardless of the substance of such discussions, the need for *négociation continuelle* is construed as a normative ideal and an absolute asset.

¹⁰³ James Der Derian, “Mediating Estrangement: A Theory for Diplomacy,” *Review of International Studies* 13, no. 2 (April 1987): 91.

¹⁰⁴ Sasson Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization: A Study of Diplomacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 59.

¹⁰⁵ Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 225.

¹⁰⁷ Armand Jean du Plessis Richelieu, *Political Testament of the Cardinal Richelieu* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 94.

2.3. *The post-classical approach to diplomacy and the question of diplomatic possibility*

Much like the classical tradition, the post-classical, or critical,¹⁰⁸ tradition is similarly diverse, with different authors working to transcend what they consider to be the limitations evident in the works of their classical counterparts. For scholars like James Der Derian,¹⁰⁹ Costas M. Constantinou,¹¹⁰ Hussein Banai,¹¹¹ Sasson Sofer,¹¹² and Rebecca Adler-Nissen,¹¹³ the key concern is with the role diplomacy plays in mediating difference across everyday social relationships, and how it becomes bound up with processes of identity construction. In these settings, there is “a deliberate act of distancing and acknowledgement of the other as a stranger.”¹¹⁴ This initial move is what establishes a fundamental quality of difference over which diplomacy is triggered for the sake of mediation. The following review focuses on the post-classical literature’s emphasis on diplomatic possibility in terms of reflexivity. In doing so, it discusses diplomacy in the context of identity construction, the ethics of the self-other relationship, and the ideas of sustainability, durability, and reflexivity. The objective is to problematize the notion of necessity established in the classical canon by drawing, in particular, on the idea of reflexivity, and to re-appraise the diplomatic encounter as taking place also, if not primarily, in ordinary social settings rather than in the exclusive context of sovereign statecraft.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ In this thesis, the adjectives post-classical and critical are used interchangeably.

¹⁰⁹ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*.

¹¹⁰ Costas M. Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, Borderlines 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹¹¹ Hussein Banai, “Diplomatic Imaginations: Mediating Estrangement in World Society,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 459–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2012.744640>.

¹¹² Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*.

¹¹³ Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “Just Greasing the Wheels? Mediating Difference or the Evasion of Power and Responsibility in Diplomacy,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 10, no. 1 (January 27, 2015): 22–28, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341303>.

¹¹⁴ Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 63.

¹¹⁵ As Gould-Davies noted, “‘states’ interact only metaphorically: it is human animals, acting in their name, who do so literally.” The post-classical focus on people is not, however, reducible to a focus on diplomats acting in an official capacity representing independent states. It is meant more in the sense that as people navigate through their

Post-classical approaches explore diplomacy in the context of the self-other relationship, viewing diplomacy as the central terrain in which identity claims are negotiated and renegotiated. Since the advent of modernity, social subjectivity is no longer exhaustible by reference to an inner self, a historical development that came about because of the process of self-denaturalization.¹¹⁶ Individuals are unable to experience a kind of coherence and unity needed to maintain a stable self-identity on their own. Because there is no immutable and asocial core to rely on, individuals turn to their social peers, their *others*, to construct a sense of self in opposition to them. In doing so, they conceive the reality of their own existence through objectification. What underlies the human capacity to “make something strange, alien, other” is, therefore, the inescapable need for a sense of self, a sense of identity.¹¹⁷ Because “it takes two to differ,”¹¹⁸ identity is not an essential feature reducible to some individual trait or attribute, but a relational, processual phenomenon that comes about in the alterity of self and other – the latter being also a self.¹¹⁹

The way this dynamic works, however, is prone to abuse.¹²⁰ In fact, most identities across history, be them individual or collective, operated with some notion of an other that is not simply different but *normatively undesirable*. This means that there is a difference between alterity and otherness, the former referring to the truism that identity can only be explored at its boundaries,¹²¹ in its opposition to alterity, while the latter denoting the tendency for any self-perspective to experience

social environment every day, they engage in mediation and ordinarily act, therefore, in a *diplomatic way*. Nigel Gould-Davies, “The Intimate Dance of Diplomacy: In Praise of Practice,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 6 (November 2013): 1462, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12084>.

¹¹⁶ Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, 110.

¹¹⁷ Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, 111.

¹¹⁸ Adi Hastings and Paul Manning, “Introduction: Acts of Alterity,” *Language & Communication* 24, no. 4 (October 2004): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2004.07.001>.

¹¹⁹ The processual approach to identity emphasizes precisely that identity “is a process of negotiation.” Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 70.

¹²⁰ Bjola, “Understanding Enmity and Friendship in World Politics,” 10.

¹²¹ Hastings and Manning, “Introduction,” 293.

what is different as negative. More specifically, the other is regularly framed in terms of a threatening alternative,¹²² a particular social danger,¹²³ and as such in need of violent control and suppression. That such a view of the other is possible has to do with what is called the paradox of identity formation. On the one hand, the self is in need of constitutive difference brought to the social context by the other, since no sense of identity is possible in its absence. On the other, the other is also an alternative to the self, a constant reminder that *things could be otherwise*, and thus a menace to the very purpose of identity: self-certainty and security.¹²⁴ As Campbell noted, the “mere existence of an alternative mode of being” is ontologically troublesome for the self, as it can never be absolutely secure in its identity as “the true identity.”¹²⁵ The reliance on alterity is, therefore, the bane and boon of identity construction. It is the condition of its production and the primary reason for its inescapable elusiveness.

Post-classical theories of diplomacy accept that such is the process whereby the self-other dynamic plays out, noting that diplomacy is one of the key turfs on which claims to identity interact with one another. If, however, the difference between self and other is what renders diplomacy necessary, then by implication its absence would make diplomacy unnecessary. Because there is “neither a reason nor a need to mediate what is same,”¹²⁶ the mediating function fulfilled by diplomacy is not called for in the presence of identity or sameness. Since diplomacy is the terrain of identity construction, this possibility forces an *a priori* consideration of whether individuals and larger collectives are able to articulate a sense of identity without differentiation.

¹²² David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

¹²³ Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, Global Horizons 1 (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹²⁴ William E. Connolly, *Identity, Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Expanded ed (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), x.

¹²⁵ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 3.

¹²⁶ Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, 112.

Construed in these terms, this hypothesis appears in the post-classical literature, but not as a serious proposition. For instance, Sharp mentions the idea of a “single, undifferentiated human community,” to be potentially formed by people that do not rely on practices of othering.¹²⁷ “If they [foreign governments] were part of us,” explains Robert Jackson, then “diplomacy would not be called for.”¹²⁸ Finally, if we were able to recognize “ourselves as the Other,” writes Der Derian at the end of his seminal book, diplomacy would indeed be unnecessary.¹²⁹ For the post-classical canon, this scenario is unlikely, and the need for diplomacy is expected to endure.

Diplomacy is necessary as long as difference remains the backbone upon which claims to identity are put forward. Therefore, post-classical theories are concerned, in large part, with the ethics of the self-other relationship. In this approach, what diplomacy is supposed to mediate and fix metaphysically – by way of rituals, routines, protocols, and other symbolic systems of exchange – is that which cannot be demarcated otherwise: the “non-place between estranged worlds.”¹³⁰ That diplomacy does *something* with and to difference is commonly accepted in the post-classical literature, but the exact nature of this relationship is the subject of debate. Sofer inquires, for instance, about the purpose of mediation itself. Because difference is the very precondition of diplomacy, he argues that “social estrangement should not be mediated; it is an integral part of a fruitful dialogue.”¹³¹ Estrangement is “conducive to the diplomatic encounter,” creating a uniquely paradoxical situation in which actors that are culturally, politically distant become physically, socially approximate in a diplomatic setting, thereby leading to an “intimate meeting between

¹²⁷ Sharp, “For Diplomacy,” 48.

¹²⁸ Jackson, “Martin Wight’s Thought on Diplomacy,” 3.

¹²⁹ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 209.

¹³⁰ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 57.

¹³¹ Sasson Sofer, “The Diplomat as a Stranger,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 8, no. 3 (November 1997): 184–85.

rivals.”¹³² The ability to accommodate and compress such oppositions in one place and time is integral to the diplomatic practice. For the post-classical canon, mediation is antithetical with this paradox if its objective is harmonization – the conversion of difference into sameness.

In problematizing the purpose of mediation, Sofer notes that diplomacy clearly “does not exist in every condition of separateness.”¹³³ This is an important recognition of an exciting puzzle, but it remains undertheorized. If difference in itself does not explain why mediation is activated in some social contexts but not in others, what else is required to account for the missing factors? In what sense does a condition of separateness have to be further qualified for diplomacy to be triggered? More precisely, what is it about a particular quality of difference that makes it *worthy of mediation* in and through diplomacy?

The preliminary answer to these questions is to be found in a closer inspection of the nature of the self-other relationship. In any particular case, the thickness of the social context and the kind of identities implicated in it are helpful indicators of the degree to which diplomacy is required. As Sharp elaborates on this connection, “the less obvious or „natural” the identities of the agents appear and the thinner the social context in which they operate, the more diplomacy is needed.”¹³⁴ There is thus a close correspondence between the certainty and stability agents experience in their respective identities, and the amount of diplomacy required to mediate over the difference constituting their social context. If diplomacy consists of the “construction, representation, negotiation, and manipulation of necessarily ambiguous identities,”¹³⁵ argues Der Derian, then its *raison d’être* is located precisely in those moments “when there are boundaries for identity and

¹³² Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 73.

¹³³ Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 73.

¹³⁴ Sharp, “For Diplomacy,” 50.

¹³⁵ Sharp, “For Diplomacy,” 33.

when those boundaries of identity are crossed.”¹³⁶ This fluidity, along with the concomitant transgressions of accepted notions of self and other, is a key attribute of the diplomatic encounter, and ambiguity and uncertainty are integral to its process. In a similar vein, Bjola argues that diplomacy, the process of “making the ‘other’,”¹³⁷ is a particular “method of building and managing relations of enmity and friendship in world politics.”¹³⁸ Sorting out who is who is a prime function of diplomacy, and it is at its most socially intensive if participants are flexible, to some degree, about who they *think* they are.

The interactive social field of diplomacy becomes barren, however, if its participants stubbornly hold on to their self-understandings. In these cases, the creativity and ambiguity associated with the diplomatic encounter are muted because actors perceive and believe themselves to be in firm control over their identities. As the social context is thickly populated with reliable “webs of significance,”¹³⁹ notions of self and other are entrenched, and the social room for contesting and reinterpreting them is limited, if not entirely absent. The result is that the difference underlying self and other is carved into stone, acting as a safeguard of accepted identities rather than as a call for interrogating them. This kind of radical difference builds up and sediments over time, and it works by capturing the other in the conceptual prison constructed in the triumphant and monolithic vision of the self. In such a frame, the other is used exclusively for the self to inscribe onto it that which the self deems undesirable, negative, threatening etc. Though difference is in abundance in these contexts, its quality is such that it drives diplomacy away from the field. If diplomacy is meant to reshuffle understandings of self and other, it fades into irrelevance as long as identities

¹³⁶ Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, 112.

¹³⁷ Bjola, “Understanding Enmity and Friendship in World Politics,” 10.

¹³⁸ Bjola, “Understanding Enmity and Friendship in World Politics,” 8.

¹³⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1973), 5.

are built on the categorical negation of the other, without any “overlap or continuity that might place self and other in the same moment.”¹⁴⁰ In the post-classical consensus, therefore, the necessity of diplomatic mediation and the perceived stability of its participants’ identity are inversely related: diplomacy is less required if its actors construe their self-knowledge *against the other, rather than through it*.

The critical discussion of the issue of difference can be further refined if two associated concepts, those of estrangement and alienation, are explored. Clark defines alienation as “the degree to which man (sic) feels powerless to achieve the role he has determined to be rightfully his in specific situations,”¹⁴¹ leading to a sense of meaninglessness because of the distance between what is and what should be. This feeling of powerlessness is characterized by anomie, in which there is a “high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals,”¹⁴² generating a need for social innovation and forms of transgressive behavior. In a more general sense, both estrangement and alienation are “bound together by the alien, the external,”¹⁴³ denoting processes whereby what is familiar becomes strange and vice versa. These dynamics often take place within one individual, as alienation can be a psychological phenomenon with considerable consequences for changes in social behavior. The worker’s estrangement from the product of his labor is a well-known example of this dynamic.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, “Difference,” in *Critical Imaginations in International Relations*, eds. Aoileann Ní Mhurchú and Reiko Shindo, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 76.

¹⁴¹ John P. Clark, “Measuring Alienation Within a Social System,” *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959): 849.

¹⁴² Melvin Seeman, “On The Meaning of Alienation,” *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959): 788.

¹⁴³ Ernst Bloch, Anne Halley, and Darko Suvin, “‘Entfremdung, Verfremdung’: Alienation, Estrangement,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 15, no. 1 (1970): 121, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144598>.

¹⁴⁴ Isidor Wallimann, *Estrangement: Marx’s Conception of Human Nature and the Division of Labor*, Contributions in Philosophy 16 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 25–40.

People can also estrange from one another, however, a process that works through the experience of strangeness. Bloch et al. bring out the creative and productive potential associated with this moment:

Strangeness [...] makes the beholder look up; it seems artful, not artificial; it reveals its own quality in its otherness. Such “estrangement” [Verfremdung] evokes surprise, and certainly has some shocking characteristics, but its effect within a purposeful context will not be uninviting. The strange externality purposes to let the beholder contemplate experience separated, as in a frame, or heightened, as on a pedestal. As has been suggested, this leads increasingly away from the usual and makes the beholder pause and take notice.¹⁴⁵

The question, then, is to sort out the “evil and beneficent modes of experience” reached in and through alienation/estrangement,¹⁴⁶ and to realize, in particular, an *ethical estrangement* of that which is other and to acknowledge difference without relegating it to the control of the self. This is possible only if the strangeness of the alienating experience is embraced rather than suppressed,¹⁴⁷ and if the beholder does “pause and take notice” because of it, which means that the self takes it as an occasion for self-reflection.¹⁴⁸ Constantinou, for instance, criticizes Der Derian for missing this element by drawing on a “repressive aspect of alienation,”¹⁴⁹ primarily by taking the other as an object rather than as a subject that is also a self. To take “estrangement in a constitutive sense,”¹⁵⁰ is to refrain from reducing the other to the acknowledgement and validation

¹⁴⁵ Bloch, Halley, and Suvin, “Entfremdung, Verfremdung,” 123.

¹⁴⁶ Bloch, Halley, and Suvin, “Entfremdung, Verfremdung,” 121.

¹⁴⁷ That such an experience is conducive for improving diplomacy is identified in the case of the US by Monteagle. See Monteagle Stearns, *Talking to Strangers: Improving American Diplomacy at Home and Abroad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁴⁸ Bloch, Halley, and Suvin, “Entfremdung, Verfremdung,” 123.

¹⁴⁹ Constantinou claims that this repressive aspect informs Der Derian’s “understanding of diplomacy’s condition of possibility,” illustrated by his paradigmatic system, whereby diplomatic paradigms succeed each other by alienating and othering their antecedents. Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, 111.

¹⁵⁰ Constantinou, 111.

of the identity of the self.¹⁵¹ Though difference is at the heart of diplomatic necessity in its basic social sense, it is incumbent upon the social actors themselves to decide what to do with the specific difference they construct in their relationship. For most critical scholars, overcoming it through a “self-effacing and other-effacing practice” is an ambition that contradicts the purpose of genuine diplomacy.¹⁵² The strangeness generated by engaging the other is a profoundly productive, even if disturbing, experience, and incorporating it in and through the diplomatic encounter is a key notion of the post-classical ethos.

The post-classical ethical concern with difference has its parallel in the classical approach. Though couched in a different vocabulary, there is a classical warning reminiscent of the post-classical insistence on a proper treatment of the other. “Successful diplomatic negotiation,” writes Garrett Mattingly, is possible only if neither party “assumes that the only permanent solution is the total destruction of the other.”¹⁵³ Political ideologies carrying a substantive claim to universalism, for instance, are in clear contradiction of this imperative,¹⁵⁴ and thus they “drive diplomacy from the field” by their very logic.¹⁵⁵ As Watson explains, “ideology and constructive diplomacy do not easily mix”¹⁵⁶ because the former aims not to mediate differences but to go beyond them altogether, while the latter is meant precisely to guard against turning otherness into sameness. This transcendentalist character puts ideology in the category of utopian thinking, which supports an

¹⁵¹ Bahar Rumelili, “Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU’s Mode of Differentiation,” *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 2004): 30–31.

¹⁵² Costas M. Constantinou and James Der Derian, “Introduction: Sustaining Global Hope: Sovereignty, Power and the Transformation of Diplomacy,” in *Sustainable Diplomacies*, eds. Costas M. Constantinou and James Der Derian (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 15, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230297159_1.

¹⁵³ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 168.

¹⁵⁴ As Freeden claims, “fascism, communism and what was variably called democracy or liberalism [...] were promoters of non-negotiable principles that sought the status of universal truths, and all became hardened in the battle of absolutes.” Michael Freeden, “Ideology and Political Theory,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 1 (February 2006): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310500395834>.

¹⁵⁵ Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, 168.

¹⁵⁶ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 81.

essentially anti-diplomatic tradition because it inaugurates “new universalisms.”¹⁵⁷ The practical and flexible nature of diplomacy imposes a necessary resistance to absolute principles.¹⁵⁸ It is for this reason that people zealously embracing such commitments, like missionaries and fanatics, make for bad diplomats in Nicolson’s analysis.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, that diplomatic objectives are by necessity limited is a common argument in both classical and post-classical writings.

The overarching task for critical scholars is, then, to identify and develop aspects of a *critical diplomatic ethos* conducive to the constant nurturing of the self-other relationship, all the while remaining cognizant of the inevitable dangers inherent in constructing any identity *via* diplomacy. One such aspect concerns the notion of sustainability,¹⁶⁰ the idea that diplomacy is best employed as a vehicle for a *modus vivendi* that sustains “accommodation among people holding not just opposite views but irreconcilable values.”¹⁶¹ In answering how this is possible, the post-classical literature reveals its explicitly normative understanding of diplomacy, in a way reminiscent of the classical emphasis on diplomatic dialogue. Specifically, the mere conservation of difference does not suffice to turn diplomacy into a sustainable practice. This is so because the “passive exercise of mediation,” claims Hussein Banai, risks ossifying situations in which estranged actors “continue to insist on the absolute or universal validity of their own grand narratives, identities, traditions and uniqueness.”¹⁶² Therefore, the critical purpose of diplomacy shifts from mediating difference

¹⁵⁷ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 150.

¹⁵⁸ Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 66.

¹⁵⁹ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 50.

¹⁶⁰ Sustainability in the sense discussed here is not about an ecologically responsible form of diplomacy. It is, rather, about the way participants of the diplomatic encounter constantly articulate and re-articulate reasons for the continuation of dialogue, thereby making it *sustainable* in the long run. On sustainable diplomacy in the sense of an ecologically responsible practice, see David J. Wellman, *Sustainable Diplomacy: Ecology, Religion, and Ethics in Muslim-Christian Relations*, 1st ed., Culture and Religion in International Relations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁶¹ Constantinou and Der Derian, “Introduction,” 17.

¹⁶² Hussein Banai, “Diplomacy and Public Imagination,” in *Sustainable Diplomacies*, eds. Costas M. Constantinou and James Der Derian (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 61, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230297159_3.

to articulating reasons “for the importance of maintaining a logic of cohabitation and critical dialogue.”¹⁶³ To continue feeding the diplomatic encounter with such a rationale is to make diplomacy sustainable. The articulation of this rationale is in and through reflexivity.

In doing so, sustainable diplomacy is supposed not simply to tolerate and represent the diversity of actors’ identities, but to be actively involved in building contexts of *pluralism*. This is another sense in which post-classical authors reveal their dissatisfaction with mere mediation. The classical approach takes diversity to be a fact of international life, an inescapable feature of the community of states because its members are as different as they are numerous. The post-classical approach moves beyond this notion of pluralism, seeing it instead not as the basic condition of diplomacy but as its intended *outcome*. In this understanding, pluralism is not to be represented and conserved, in the sense of diplomacy setting into stone an immutable difference between self and other, but *re-presented* in the sense of a reflexive and critical re-enactment. If pluralism is “not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference,”¹⁶⁴ then it is not a given but an achievement, which is to be realized through diplomacy.

This position is consistent with writings of an ‘ethnological’ persuasion.¹⁶⁵ In this tradition, the other is held up, indeed celebrated, as a potential resource, a mirror in which the self can be critically reassessed.¹⁶⁶ Such self-reflection may lead to various outcomes, one of them being identification, a sense of likeness between self and other. This appears to be preferable to more obvious forms of controlling the other, the problem with likeness is that “any recognition of

¹⁶³ Banai, “Diplomacy and Public Imagination,” 61.

¹⁶⁴ Diana L. Eck, “What Is Pluralism?” (The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, 2006), https://rootandbranches.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/eck_what_is_pluralism_2.pdf.

¹⁶⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, 2002; Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*.

¹⁶⁶ Lajos L. Brons, “Othering, an Analysis,” *Transcience, a Journal of Global Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 69–90.

equality involves the denial of genuine difference.”¹⁶⁷ Likeness establishes the other by modeling it according to the assumption “that what is true for the self is true for the encountered other as well.”¹⁶⁸ Crucially, there is a displacement effect underpinning this process, as the other’s constitutive difference is relegated outside the social space. In such cases, identification works on a colonial logic, forcing an “integration of visions” that erases difference and imposes in its stead the self-congratulatory substance of the self’s very own values and norms.¹⁶⁹ The true potential of critical self-reflection is lost, and the process degenerates into a self-authenticating device. Identifying elements of continuity, if not absolute likeness, between self and other is not guaranteed to lead to an improved state of affairs in the ethics of the self-other relationship.

If diplomacy is to critically re-enact, rather than conserve, difference, then how is this to be done? In the post-classical answer, it is by demystifying and debunking “seemingly monolithic representations of self and other.”¹⁷⁰ As Constantinou and Der Derian assert, “diplomacy cannot and should not escape its socializing disposition.”¹⁷¹ Framed in this way, the key attributes associated with diplomacy, in addition to sustainability, are durability and practical reflexivity. The notion of durability is one around which both classical and critical scholars converge because it resonates with the classical demand for continuous diplomatic dialogue. Wiseman criticizes, for instance, American isolationism and Washington’s “historical distrust of diplomacy,”¹⁷² primarily because of its incompatibility with the ideal of talking to enemies, which is “inherent in and

¹⁶⁷ Blaney and Inayatullah, “Difference,” 76.

¹⁶⁸ Brons, “Othering, an Analysis,” 71.

¹⁶⁹ Blaney and Inayatullah, “Difference,” 76–77.

¹⁷⁰ Banai, “Diplomacy and Public Imagination,” 63.

¹⁷¹ Costas M. Constantinou and James Der Derian, eds., *Sustainable Diplomacies*, Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

¹⁷² Geoffrey Wiseman, “Distinctive Characteristics of American Diplomacy,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 2011): 241.

essential to diplomatic culture's norm of continuous dialogue."¹⁷³ Indeed, the alternative to engaging with hostile regimes is a "monological myopia,"¹⁷⁴ a kind of navel-gazing that shuns diplomatic dialogue for fear of critical self-reflection.¹⁷⁵ In this case, identity is basically reduced to an internally organized regime type by another name, the outcome of a sovereign decision that is fundamentally asocial because it is inward-looking. That American identity has historically emphasized its own exceptionalism, for instance, is a logical consequence of its unwillingness to engage in critical self-reflection and to look in the mirror of its others.¹⁷⁶

Finally, to speak of sustainable diplomatic praxis is meaningless without reflexivity. Diplomatic reflexivity entails a conscious and critical endeavor whereby actors in diplomacy strive for an objective awareness of their own subjective values and interests in the process of diplomatic mediation.¹⁷⁷ The need for such reflexivity is realized only if diplomacy is accepted to be guided by a common "moral conception."¹⁷⁸ In the classical canon, this moral conception is based on the recognition that no state is likely to have its way fully unimpeded in international politics, leading to national diplomatic objectives that are *ideally limited* in scope and ambition. For the post-classical literature, the imperative is more consequential. It forms the cornerstone of the critical

¹⁷³ Geoffrey Wiseman, "Engaging the Enemy: An Essential Norm for Sustainable US Diplomacy," in *Sustainable Diplomacies*, eds. Costas M. Constantinou and James Der Derian (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 213, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230297159_11.

¹⁷⁴ Wiseman, "Distinctive Characteristics of American Diplomacy," 230.

¹⁷⁵ Not for the reasons discussed here, but Berridge also concludes his book by claiming that unfriendly powers reach out to each other even if they previously avoided diplomatic interaction. Having "become impatient with third parties," the necessity of dialogue eventually takes over and adversaries seek direct communication. The sociopolitical mechanism that allows them to part ways with the previous state of affairs is, however, unclear. Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy*, 129.

¹⁷⁶ For works that discuss aspects of the historical poverty of American diplomacy and its intimate relationship with American self-identity see Walter L Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2009.

¹⁷⁷ Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, "Advancing a Reflexive International Relations," *Millennium* 39, no. 3 (May 2011): 814.

¹⁷⁸ Hussein Banai, "Reflexive Diplomacy," in *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique, and Practice*, eds. Jack L. Amoureux and Brent J Steele (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 227–30.

diplomatic project and of the “plural condition of international life.”¹⁷⁹ Because there are inevitably moral decisions to be made over “what counts and what is not to count in the image we want to have of ourselves and the correlative image we want to construct of others,”¹⁸⁰ the post-classical answer to this question of morality is pluralism. As Hussein Banai argues at length, the guarantee of this pluralism is a

“critical dialogue with those approaches that seek to either deny or obscure this underlying diversity in order to account for the presence of marginalized voices and agencies.”¹⁸¹

If social actors are engaged in such a dialogue, their diplomatic practice becomes infused with an emancipatory potential that affects both the self and the other. This potential becomes most manifest, in the words of William Connolly, when social actors commit to working “on [themselves] and others to affirm, without existential resentment, the contestability of each in the eyes of the others.”¹⁸² To achieve and sustain this contestability, mere diplomatic dialogue, of the classical kind that fixes differences between interlocutors, does not suffice. Though durable, this kind of interaction is not reflexive enough according to the post-classical ideal. What renders reflexivity indispensable is thus the introduction of pluralism as a moral conception. Through such a diplomatic practice, which is sustainable because it is both durable and reflexive, the plurality of international life is enacted and practiced, rather than simply represented and conserved.

¹⁷⁹ Banai, “Reflexive Diplomacy,” 231.

¹⁸⁰ McSweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests*, 77.

¹⁸¹ Banai, “Reflexive Diplomacy,” 231.

¹⁸² Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, 2002, xxi.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter reviewed classical and post-classical approaches to diplomacy. It found that classical scholars focus on the necessity of diplomacy, and post-classical scholars focus on the possibility of diplomacy. Classical discussions of diplomatic necessity can be grouped into two ideals. The first one appraises diplomacy as a social/societal institution. Writings in the English School are an eminent example. They approach diplomacy as a primary institution of the society of states, along with war and international law. Members of this society participate in these institutions, working to maintain and reproduce them in an anarchical setting. Diplomacy is the indispensable infrastructure hosting these efforts. In the words of Jackson, “when the diplomatic system is absent we are not likely to be contemplating political activities that could accurately be labelled ‘international’.”¹⁸³ Because a society of states is unimaginable without diplomacy, classical authors attach to diplomacy a higher objective, coexistence, in whose name it is to be practiced. Members of this society accept to be bound by a set of common rules, norms, and values, all of which provide the substance of their collective, ongoing interest in sustaining the community.¹⁸⁴ Diplomacy helps channel these efforts peacefully, but interstate conflict in the form of war is always a possibility. The diplomatic culture is meant to temper the violent impulses of individual states, and it seeks to decrease the chances of *total* wars that risk destroying the society of states. The objective of diplomacy is thus not peace in the abstract, at any and all cost. Rather, it is an international order, and its protection is occasionally achievable only through non-diplomatic means.¹⁸⁵ Diplomacy as

¹⁸³ Jackson, “Martin Wight’s Thought on Diplomacy,” 1.

¹⁸⁴ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 13.

¹⁸⁵ Alderson and Hurrell concur that “thinking in terms of *society* does not in any way imply that relations among states are necessarily peaceful, stable or harmonious.” The question is about whether conflicts “occur against the backdrop of shared institutions.” Alderson and Hurrell, “Bull’s Conception of International Society,” 4.

a *social* institution means that members of this society, and the great managers in particular,¹⁸⁶ are *reflexive* about what is required in a particular historical context to maintain international order. Diplomacy assists, in the absence of international hierarchy, in the task of “how order can be maintained in a realm featuring multiple sites of political authority.”¹⁸⁷

The second classical view of diplomatic necessity is the organic/systemic view. The adjective ‘organic’ refers to discussions in which the recourse to diplomacy is akin to a self-explanatory automatism. That is, the becoming of states and their self-preservation is possible in and through diplomacy. In making this case, classical authors argue that diplomacy is “nothing less than reason made manifest on the international stage.”¹⁸⁸ It is the primary condition of being for a state because the most basic of interests – independence, political autonomy, territorial integrity, external sovereignty, diplomatic recognition –, are achievable in and through diplomacy. Rather than realizing such goals by violent means, diplomacy offers a path of least resistance among a plethora of peers bent on securing these same objectives. Diplomacy is a vehicle through which to manage “relations between polities with different accounts of the ‘good life’.”¹⁸⁹ Despite their differences, these polities are identical in wanting to preserve themselves in their own ways. This ideal of diplomacy broadens, then, the horizon of its applicability beyond the formation and maintenance of an international society. If diplomacy is a particular *modality of interaction* that evolves

¹⁸⁶ Shunji Cui and Barry Buzan, “Great Power Management in International Society,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 2 (June 2016): 181–210, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow005>.

¹⁸⁷ George Lawson, “Revolutions and the International,” *Theory and Society* 44, no. 4 (July 2015): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-015-9251-x>.

¹⁸⁸ Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 38.

¹⁸⁹ Ian Hall, “The Transformation of Diplomacy: Mysteries, Insurgencies and Public Relations,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 1 (January 2010): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00878.x>.

organically between individual states minding their own business, then it is a permanent feature of international politics whose necessity is not arrested at the boundaries of a society of states.

What is unclear is what happens at the intersections of these two understandings of diplomatic necessity, the first applicable as a “Westphalian master institution” to an integrated *society* of states,¹⁹⁰ and the second referring to a loosely formed *system* of states. Specifically, how is the necessity of diplomacy to be realized in a relationship between an accepted member of the international society and a state deemed illegitimate, and thus lingering outside of this society, but acknowledged to be part of the international system in that its behavior is by all accounts “a necessary element in the calculations of the other.”¹⁹¹ What if the social/societal requirement of diplomacy is obviously muted in such a relationship, and its organic/systemic necessity is likewise not triggered for some reason? Bull ponders upon the questions raised by the existence of such greyzones in the following way:

“Between an international system that is clearly also an international society, and a system that is clearly not a society, there lie cases where a sense of common interests is tentative and inchoate; where the common rules perceived are vague and ill-formed, and there is doubt as to whether they are worthy of the name of rules; or where common institutions – relating to diplomatic machinery or to limitations in war – are implicit or embryonic. If we ask of modern international society the questions ‘when did it begin?’ or ‘what were its geographical limits?’ we are at once involved in difficult problems of the tracing of boundaries.”¹⁹²

The description is evocative of the immature state of affairs evident between China and the US after 1949, with bilateral diplomacy being at best embryonic indeed. At this point, however, the classical canon seems to have run the course of its theoretical usefulness. It foregrounded two

¹⁹⁰ Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, 226.

¹⁹¹ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 10.

¹⁹² Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 15.

meanings of diplomatic necessity but stopped short of offering a recipe of analysis applicable for empirical investigation. The necessity of diplomacy is further to be refined for it to be applicable for the case study at hand.

Post-classical scholars address questions of both necessity and possibility. The possibility of diplomacy is closely connected with the post-classical ideal of necessity. In critical discussions, diplomacy is a “normative philosophy of international relations.”¹⁹³ It fulfills a sociopolitical need of mediating difference, and interstate diplomacy is only one historical form among many others serving this function. Diplomacy is not simply an epiphenomenon of an international order,¹⁹⁴ a response to the irreducible diversity of sovereign states. Instead, this diversity is the *condition as well as the outcome* of diplomacy in the post-classical approach, making the task of its practitioners emancipatory. Taking such a view in the context of identity construction, Constantinou thus claims that “the creation of subjectivity is both the reason and the effect of diplomacy.”¹⁹⁵ Diplomacy is practiced not simply out of the necessity of an objective and unchanging underlying plurality.¹⁹⁶ Rather, it is deployed for the sake of enacting that plurality.

The post-classical emphasis on reflexivity demonstrates an explicit concern with the possibility of diplomacy. Reflexivity is tied to a particular choice through which the necessity of diplomacy can be realized. In the post-classical ethos, it is bound up with the extent to which diplomatic *actors* deliberate about who they are, willing to look into the mirror of the other and engage in self-

¹⁹³ Hall, “The Transformation of Diplomacy,” 254.

¹⁹⁴ Iver B. Neumann, “The English School on Diplomacy: Scholarly Promise Unfulfilled,” *International Relations* 17, no. 3 (September 2003): 350.

¹⁹⁵ Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, 113.

¹⁹⁶ In all fairness, classical scholars like Adam Watson and Harold Nicolson do accept that great power diplomacy is necessary to protect the plurality of international life if it is under threat. Nevertheless, their admission is still far from the critical-normative aspect of diplomacy regularly emphasized in the critical canon.

reflection. In this view, the mediation of difference is an ethical act because it is the *morally responsible* thing to do.

Overall, the classical and post-classical literatures are helpful but also limited in their usefulness for this thesis. Classical notions of necessity stressed the purposive aspect of diplomacy. They imply that diplomacy comes about and is maintained if it serves a practical-reasonable objective. Because, however, the reasons enlisted in the classical canon are transhistorical and acontextual, the turn to diplomacy tends to be taken for granted. Consequently, the process of *actors becoming aware of their need for diplomacy* received no sustained theoretical attention. This is a problem for this thesis. If diplomatic normalization is a case-sensitive matter that is historically specific and contextual, the social/societal and the organic/systemic understandings of necessity are too broad to be immediately applicable.

The post-classical emphasis on reflexivity is key in highlighting the condition of possibility for diplomacy to emerge. In the context of diplomatic normalization, possibility means that the process of actors becoming aware of their need for diplomacy is a reflexive endeavor *par excellence*. It entails deliberating about purposes that render diplomacy necessary rather than unnecessary in a particular context. Because, however, the post-classical ideal of reflexivity is of a *necessarily ethical* enterprise, these discussions frame diplomatic mediation as a morally responsible practice. This is an unnecessary *a priori* filter. If decisions to normalize relations come in many flavors and stripes, depending on the actors involved and the nature of the relationship, necessity need not be associated with an ethics of alterity.

In addition, two aspects of diplomatic normalization cannot be accommodated in this review. Both of them have to do with an understanding of normalization as a *process of change*. The first is that normalization is an outcome of interactions between actors involved in the relationship. There is,

therefore, a processual and relational character that needs further conceptual development. The second is that this process of change constitutes a practical shift from a previous, non-diplomatic state of affairs to a new, diplomatic one. There is, therefore, a practical character to normalization that also requires attention. In the next chapter, diplomacy is explored as a practical-relational phenomenon. In doing so, the practice turn in diplomacy is discussed, to be followed by the relational turn in the social sciences. The questions animating this discussion are no longer why diplomacy is necessary and how it is possible. They are, rather, why and how ideas and practices can be both sedimented and transformed in a settled practice like diplomacy.

3. Practical Diplomacy and the Relational and Practice Turns in Social Inquiry

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 2 argued that the classical ideal of diplomatic necessity consists of two views, the social and the organic, and that their contribution, though valuable, stopped at pointing to questions pertaining to necessity that cannot be explored by relying on the classical canon alone. The chapter also discussed post-classical theories to problematize the classical meanings of necessity and to draw attention to the role reflexivity plays in diplomatic mediation between self and other. By now, it is accepted that the necessity of diplomacy refers to its purposive character, and that the possibility of diplomacy refers to the role reflexivity plays in conceptualizing this purpose.

What is further to be understood is *why* and *how* social relationships, including (non-)diplomatic ones, can both stay the same and change. These relationships need to be able to stay the same if the absence of normalization endures over time, and they need to be able to change if normalization takes place. To prolong the theoretical journey in this direction, this chapter explores practical diplomacy and two associated turns in social inquiry: the relational turn and the practice turn.

The chapter argues that diplomacy consists of social practices constituted in the interactions of its participants. First, it is relational in that the practices making up a relationship, including (non-)diplomatic ones, are forged by actors investing in reproducing certain practices rather than others as meaningful. It is this back-and-forth between two parties that is responsible for construing the relationship one way or another. Second, it is practical in that these social practices are not carved into stone. They can be stable as well as fragile, their endurance and/or transformation depending on the *practical purpose* they serve in the relationship. What the chapter contests is that despite the common acknowledgement of the Janus-faced nature of social practices – lending themselves both to stability and to change –, the dilemma of endurance versus transformation in and through

them is still poorly understood. Analytical wagers referring to the ability of practices to *underpin* social life as well as to *undermine* it abound in the literature, but why and how they are responsible for both of these influences remains to be better conceptualized.

The chapter contributes to this understanding by integrating the concept of *yoking*. Introduced by Chicago School sociologist Andrew Abbott,¹⁹⁷ yoking helps appraise the creation, transformation, and maintenance of practices in terms of their correspondence with the practical objective they serve. Practices come to be if they are *yoked* as meaningful by reference to their social purpose. That is, they are stabilized as long as actors invest in making practices cohere around certain meanings. Conversely, practices are undone if the correspondence with their social purpose is undermined. That is, they are destabilized once actors begin to divest of their coherence with accepted meanings. In the context of diplomatic normalization, yoking means that the old, non-diplomatic state of affairs of a relationship holds as long as it is yoked as fulfilling a social purpose. In this case, the absence of diplomatic dialogue is accepted as a practical, reasonable matter. It also means that the new, diplomatic state of affairs can come about if this old purpose is unyoked. In this case, the absence of diplomatic dialogue comes to be recognized as no longer in sync with a practical, reasonable objective.

In what follows, practical diplomacy is discussed first, to be followed by a review of the practice turn and practical change, as well as the relational turn in social inquiry. Much like in chapter 2, the objective is to conduct a critical review. It is to sort out the contributions these literatures can make to the theoretical ambition of this thesis, and to make the case for improvement in other areas of concern for a framework on diplomatic normalization.

¹⁹⁷ Andrew Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” *Social Research* 62, no. 4 (1995): 857–82.

3.2. *Practical diplomacy*

Demonstrated in chapter 2, neither the classical nor the critical literature on diplomacy paid much attention to the study of diplomatic change understood as normalization between erstwhile enemies. With a few notable exceptions,¹⁹⁸ this deficiency is due to the state and status of theorization in the literature. To recount, classical authors construed their analysis by reflecting on their own experiences as professional diplomats. Their suggestions and prescriptions were mirror images of self-understandings made on the basis of their historical participation in the diplomatic profession. Over time, these narratives ossified into a classical tradition in which diplomacy is routinely assessed in a deductive fashion, without its adherents scrutinizing the genesis of their accounts and whether they are suited, if at all, for theorization. Unsurprisingly, the old canon is hardly accommodating of the need to theorize diplomacy and to reconstruct it as a full-fledged category of analysis. Post-classical authors fare better in this regard, as they seek to balance between generating fine-tuned approaches that are contextually sensitive, on the one hand, and keeping their distance from universal theories, on the other.

Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp specify that it is not theories of diplomacy that are lacking, but a “theory of the theories of diplomacy.”¹⁹⁹ This “resistance to meta-theorization” is due to numerous factors,²⁰⁰ key among them the socially negotiated and practical foundations upon which diplomacy rests. Various objects of diplomatic inquiry come in many flavors and stripes, most of them highly complex processes involving webs of actors with diverse goals, motivations, and

¹⁹⁸ Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*; Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*; Derian, “Mediating Estrangement”; Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobst, *Understanding International Diplomacy: Theory, Practice and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

¹⁹⁹ Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp, “Introduction: Understanding Diplomatic Practice,” eds. Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016), 3.

²⁰⁰ Constantinou, Kerr, and Sharp, “Introduction,” 3.

desires. To explore them through a diplomatic lens, they cannot be squeezed into preformed categories of interests, values, or preferences. Therefore, the meta-theoretical shallowness is, on the one hand, a sort of *empirical* necessity, a reflection of the vast pool of phenomena that *can* acquire a diplomatic character in social life and be subjected for diplomatic analysis. It is also because, on the other, contemporary writers on diplomacy appear to share an epistemic community by and large estranged from seeing theory-building as the primary purpose of IR. The current situation, argues Chris Brown, does not bode well for an ambition, modelled on the natural sciences, that seeks to account for diplomacy in terms of law-like regularities. Yet, there are “features of practices which are not specific to the single case and thus can be theorized.”²⁰¹ Attempts to theorize them according to a practical approach can, therefore, yield valuable results not limited to the contexts on which they are based. Practice theory seems, indeed, “perfectly suited to the study of diplomacy.”²⁰² With this stock-taking in mind, there is therefore a possible *via media*.

Such an approach reflecting a middle-of-the-road philosophy is evident in Sending, Pouliot and Neumann. They rely on relational analytical categories like configurations and authorities to grasp “the processes through which diplomacy is made and remade through practices whose characteristics must be treated as contingent and open to change.”²⁰³ One configuration has to do with the intertwinement of various actors participating in diplomacy because they claim to speak on behalf of territorial and non-territorial entities. These actors engage and compete with one another for *authority*, which is the second category of analysis. By doing so, they challenge and

²⁰¹ Chris Brown, “The ‘Practice Turn’, *Phronesis* and Classical Realism: Towards a Phronetic International Political Theory?,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40, no. 3 (June 2012): 442, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829812441893>.

²⁰² Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, “Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy: A Research Agenda,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 50, no. 3 (September 2015): 298, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836715574913>.

²⁰³ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann, “Introduction,” 7.

undermine the state as the primary subject to be represented in diplomacy. Another configuration is the changing balance between representing and governing, the two key diplomatic functions.²⁰⁴ In genuine practical fashion, the authors' approach aborts any attempt to capture the essence of diplomacy, and leaves it to the actors themselves to "produce what counts as competent diplomatic practice."²⁰⁵ Rather than discipline its conceptual boundaries in advance, the authors define diplomacy in a minimalist way, as a "relational and political process of claiming authority and jurisdiction that is made and remade through practices."²⁰⁶ The analytical priority is not to impose a fixed understanding, a "single authoritative, declaratory account" of diplomacy.²⁰⁷ Rather, it is to focus upon any political and social process that acquires a diplomatic quality according to the actors themselves.

What is accepted as worthy of this quality does not come about as a result of consensus, however. Because order "does not cohere on its own,"²⁰⁸ social actors are invited to produce at least an illusion of coherence. Their attempts to do so unfold through discursive practices. Discourse is thus productive, laden with power in the Foucauldian sense, of social realities in that it both enables and restrains certain actors and courses of action at the same time. If agency is understood as doing something that could be done otherwise, then the evidence for this difference is the deployment of "power and authority."²⁰⁹ In this regard, Doty's seminal study is a good illustration.²¹⁰ Instead of

²⁰⁴ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann, "The Future of Diplomacy," 535–40.

²⁰⁵ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann, "Introduction," 7.

²⁰⁶ Philippe Bourbeau, "The Practice Approach in Global Politics," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 2, no. 2 (April 2017): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogx001>.

²⁰⁷ Constantinou, Kerr, and Sharp, "Introduction: Understanding Diplomatic Practice," 1.

²⁰⁸ Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, "International Practices," in *International Practices*, eds. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862373.003>.

²⁰⁹ Michael J. Shapiro, "Textualizing Global Politics," in *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*, eds. James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1989), 21.

²¹⁰ Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (September 1993): 297, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600810>.

asking why certain foreign policy decisions were made by the US *vis-à-vis* the Philippines, she focuses on the ontologically prior question of *how* those options were possible to begin with. Instead of relying on the typical substantialist assumption that posits the prior existence of structures and actors, she opts for a processual and relational approach in which subjects and subjectivities are continually and simultaneously constructed in discourse.²¹¹ Because the “production of discourses and of subjectivity and sociality is indissoluble,”²¹² an exploration of discursive practices reveals what enables “social actors to act, to frame policy as they do, and to wield the capabilities they do.”²¹³ Doty’s approach thus provides a fine example of how discursive practices instantiate a realm of intelligibility in which certain courses of action are thinkable, as well as how they produce subjectivities, some more socially powerful than others, for actors to occupy. These discursive practices are detectable in the production of competent diplomacy. In the next section, practices are treated to a more general discussion.

²¹¹ Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction,” 305.

²¹² Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction,” 302.

²¹³ Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction,” 299.

3.3. *The practice turn in social inquiry and IR*

The practice turn has claimed primacy for the practical nature and constitution of world politics. Associated with thinkers like Theodore R. Schatzki, whose influence went beyond the confines of sociology, the practice turn originated in social theory.²¹⁴ Schatzki defined practice as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.”²¹⁵ Ever since, the in-betweenness of this approach has been its most significant yield in the social sciences. Its manifold advantages stem from the concept of habitus, which is “sufficiently psychological to avoid physical determinism, sufficiently nonpsychological to be embodied, and adequately supple to account for much if not all human activity.”²¹⁶

Practices are the bridge over the ontological abyss between individualist and non-individualist accounts of social order. For Schatzki, a particular social order emanates from “arrangements of people, artifacts, and things,”²¹⁷ and practices function as its primary context in determining the “meanings and establishment” of those arrangements.²¹⁸ In doing so, two key determinants are pertinent to social order: what people do (1) and how meaning is instituted (2). The first one is captured by Schatzki’s “practical intelligibility,” and it pertains to the contextually contingent character of what *makes sense* for any actor to do. The second is the “realm of intelligibility,” and it is responsible for instituting certain meanings rather than others.²¹⁹ The two intelligibilities are closely associated and connected through “understandings, rules and a teleoaffective structure.”

²¹⁴ Theodore R Schatzki, Eike von Savigny, and Karin Knorr Cetina, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2005).

²¹⁵ Theodore R Schatzki, “Introduction: Practice Theory,” eds. Theodore R Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

²¹⁶ Schatzki, “Introduction,” 17.

²¹⁷ Schatzki, “Introduction,” 15.

²¹⁸ Schatzki, “Introduction,” 16.

²¹⁹ Theodore R Schatzki, “Practice Mind-Ed Orders,” eds. Theodore R Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 53–56.

To properly navigate through them with social competence, the “socially constituted mind” is active in linking practices to social orders.²²⁰ Therefore, in Schatzki’s understanding, practices are in part mentally organized phenomena that reproduce and are reproduced by the social order,²²¹ with psychological and cognitive mechanisms at play in grasping this sense of practicality. This implies that social order, or structure, *as well as* individuality, or agency, are the outcome of practices.²²²

In the discipline of IR, much of the practice turn is indebted to the work of Pierre Bourdieu rather than Schatzki. Known for his philosophical commitment that the “real is relational,”²²³ Bourdieu focused on social practices and forged an influential conceptual vocabulary to explore them. Bourdieusian IR is notable for its reflexive epistemology, relational ontology, and commitment to practical theorizing.²²⁴ Practice-oriented studies employ Bourdieu’s dispositions and positions, which roughly correspond to habitus and field respectively, and argue that practices emerge at their “confluence.”²²⁵ Habitus refers to the bodily or corporeal aspect of practices, which consists of “lasting, transposable dispositions” and “historically accumulated trajectories.”²²⁶ Habitus is a *structured* structure in the sense of “being determined by the past conditions which have produced

²²⁰ Schatzki, “Practice Mind-Ed Orders,” 50.

²²¹ Schatzki, “Practice Mind-Ed Orders,” 61.

²²² Theodore R. Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527470>.

²²³ Frederic Vandenberghe, “‘The Real Is Relational’: An Epistemological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu’s Generative Structuralism,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 1 (March 1999): 32–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00064>.

²²⁴ Vincent Pouliot and Frédéric Mérand, “Bourdieu’s Concepts,” in *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR*, ed. Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 24–45.

²²⁵ Vincent Pouliot, “Methodology,” in *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR*, ed. Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 47.

²²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 72; Pouliot, “Methodology,” 55.

the principle of [its] production.”²²⁷ But it is also a *structuring* structure because it functions as “principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations.”²²⁸

Besides the dispositional or habitual condition of practice, the positional enactment of practice takes place according to the fields within which social actors are embedded. Fields are regulated social spaces structured along three dimensions of differentiation. They are, first, governed by power relations that inform and sustain imbalances and asymmetries favoring certain actors at the expense of others; second, populated by stakes and interests that associate social actors with one another and over which they compete; and third, finally, arranged by particular games with rules that render practical action and interaction possible and meaningful.²²⁹ In summary, a field is “a space of objective, hierarchical, regulated, and structured relations around a set of stakes that stays more or less faithful to a set of borders.”²³⁰ These dimensions are responsible for the arrangement that results in a particular field. Changes along any of them may necessitate a renegotiation of the social space, leading to an alternative configuration to be reproduced through the regular instantiation of a new habitus. For instance, if a conflictual game is in play, the field is reproduced as all actors, dominant and underdog alike, share in the practical notion that the stakes for which they compete constitute *valuable* social goods. Once this *illusio* or symbolic investment changes, the power imbalance may no longer hold and the rules of the game, if not the game itself, can be subjected to scrutiny and reconfiguration. If a fundamental overhaul occurs, a new field may be inaugurated on the practical remnants of the old one.

²²⁷ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

²²⁸ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

²²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, Theory, Culture & Society (London: Sage, 1993), 72–77.

²³⁰ Pouliot and Mérand, “Bourdieu’s Concepts,” 35.

The advantage of the Bourdieusian approach is its ability to account for stability *as well as* change in social life. Doing so in a theoretically coherent way, however, is fraught with challenges. While substantialist approaches are by default ill-equipped to theorize change, it is equally difficult for relational approaches to account “for the plain fact that much of the social world stays the same much of the time.”²³¹ For Bourdieu, what is responsible for the stasis experienced in social life is called *doxa*, or the invisible and unquestionable “everything that goes without saying.”²³² These are assumptions and points of agreement social actors “tacitly and even unwittingly accept” by virtue of entering the same field and its game.²³³ Though the field is construed according to them, *doxa* are not explicit but pre-intentional and pre-reflexive in that they are “unthought.”²³⁴ *Doxa* are what accounts for experiencing social reality as self-evident, and its appearance as largely beyond questioning. In determining “the limits of the doable and the thinkable,” *doxa* invite social actors well in sync with the field to *unconsciously misrecognize* “the arbitrary for the essential.”²³⁵

Bourdieu’s legacy continues to inform the practice turn in IR. Adler and Pouliot invoke Bourdieu’s relational ontology in emphasizing the potential of bridging familiar disciplinary divides that appear in many debates in IR. In a nutshell, practices are unfriendly terrain for enforcing dichotomies of sociological analysis. The practice approach not so much cuts through – in the sense of solving – the Gordian knots of questions over structure and agency, ideas and matter, rationality and relationality, or stability and change, as it renders ontologically meaningless the analytical urge to prioritize one over the other.²³⁶ This aspect of practice also follows from its focus

²³¹ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 859.

²³² Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 51.

²³³ Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 73–74.

²³⁴ Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 172.

²³⁵ Karl Maton, “Habitus,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Oxfordshire, England; New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 60.

²³⁶ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 5.

on relations “rather than alignment with a specific empirical object and/or method of inquiry.”²³⁷ Within the debate over logics of social action, for instance, the logic of habit,²³⁸ or practicality,²³⁹ is cast as a link between consequentialism and appropriateness. These tend to emphasize, respectively, the structural or the agentic side of social action, without practices being reducible to *either* of them.

Practices are recognizable given a number of specific properties. In a widely accepted definition,²⁴⁰ practices are “socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.”²⁴¹ Four characteristics are noteworthy. First, practices are material and meaningful. They are mediated through the human body in a corporeal sense and *via* physical artifacts, but their meaning is to be deciphered by reference to shared social understandings, or the realm of intelligibility in Schatzki’s vocabulary. Second, practices are individual, or agential, and structural. This means that “in and through practice agents lock in structural meaning in time and space.”²⁴² Their doing so is never able, however, to seal hermetically the gap between practices and the meanings held about them, leaving the door open to new interpretations. Third, knowledge is not only behind or prior to practices. Rather, it is *bound up* in them. Practices embody and reproduce assumptions that most often “remain tacit and

²³⁷ Scott Eacott, *Beyond Leadership: A Relational Approach to Organizational Theory in Education* (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 27.

²³⁸ Ted Hopf, “The Logic of Habit in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (December 2010): 539–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110363502>.

²³⁹ Vincent Pouliot, “The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities,” *International Organization* 62, no. 02 (April 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818308080090>.

²⁴⁰ Bourbeau calls it the “most discussed” in the literature. Bourbeau, “The Practice Approach in Global Politics,” 173.

²⁴¹ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 6.

²⁴² Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 15.

inarticulate.”²⁴³ This pool of mentally inaccessible knowledge is what informs dispositions that make up the Bourdieusian habitus, or what for Searle is the so-called *background* required for intentionality.²⁴⁴ Fourth, practices are such that they account for both change and continuity in social life.

This final aspect is a familiar claim in the literature, but the way in which practices can preserve a prevailing social order and *also* set the stage for its transformation is a thorny one. On this point, Adler and Pouliot argue that if social actors attempt to “recover” background knowledges reflexively,²⁴⁵ a possibility arises to bring them into awareness. The implications of this process are not straightforward. Adler and Pouliot claim, first, that “individuals’ reflexive normative and instrumental judgments” make possible the institutionalization of practices,²⁴⁶ which can enhance the endurance and stability of practices. They assert, second, that “reflexivity and judgment are also at the foundation of practice transformation,”²⁴⁷ alluding to the possibility that such deliberation by social actors can lead to change in practices. As the “source of ontological stability in social life,” it is from practice that “social change originates.”²⁴⁸ If practices constitute the basic particles of social life and serve as the “gluon of IR,”²⁴⁹ then “change in practice has no other origin than the accomplishment of practice.”²⁵⁰ In line with this reasoning, Adler and Pouliot propose that change can take place in subjectivities, in practices, and in social orders, but refrain from specifying the mechanism through which any of the three can transform.

²⁴³ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 16.

²⁴⁴ John R. Searle, *Intentionality, an Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 141–59.

²⁴⁵ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 16.

²⁴⁶ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 16.

²⁴⁷ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 17.

²⁴⁸ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 16.

²⁴⁹ Bourbeau, “The Practice Approach in Global Politics,” 171.

²⁵⁰ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 18.

Two problems are immediately noteworthy. First, these assertions implicate reflection in a process whose consequence for a particular social field cannot be settled beforehand: Is the *making explicit* of background knowledges meant to help carve them into stone, or to feed critical reflection aimed at questioning them? Another, more serious issue is that both a *doxic* and a *reflexive* scaffolding are claimed to be underlying the stability of practices. If a condition of practical reproduction is for doxic knowledge to remain tacit and inarticulate, its exposure through reflection would likely lead to social scrutiny and the possible undermining of this “silent assent.”²⁵¹ Pouliot and Cornut point to the subtle processes through which “reflexivity serves conservative purposes,”²⁵² but they make no effort to flesh out these mechanisms in more detail. Hopf stresses the opposite, arguing that it is by resuscitating the reflexive/reflective aspect of practice theory that the practice turn can better formulate a “credible account for change in world politics.”²⁵³ Reflexivity is, in this view, laden with a creative and critical potential needed to rearrange social life, not a stabilizing force that serves the prolongation of the status quo. In any case, the question of practical change, and the role reflexivity plays in this process, requires further theoretical attention.

²⁵¹ Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 73.

²⁵² Pouliot and Cornut, “Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy,” 306.

²⁵³ Ted Hopf, “Change in International Practices,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (September 2018): 687, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117718041>.

3.4. *The question of practical change*

The notion of change is intimately associated with both the practice turn and critical studies of diplomacy surveyed briefly above, but the question of how it actually works is yet to be refined. There are useful starting points for such an elaboration. For instance, practice-oriented studies inspired by Bourdieu focus on so-called background knowledge, which forms the structural backbone against which practices are enacted. This leads them to place an emphasis on the automatic and iterative aspect of practices, with less room for interrogating the practical sources of change. On the other hand, practices can never accurately mirror or reflect those tacit rules and norms according to which they are performed. Because of these ambiguities and uncertainties, there is “wiggle room” for agency even in repetition.²⁵⁴ It is unclear, however, what this wiggle room is or where exactly it originates from.

The social order reproduces itself because the common sense of any particular field renders social reality self-evident and makes actors contribute to its upholding. Situations are thus resolved as actors behave unreflexively in accordance with dispositions generated by their respective habitus. This practical sense breaks down, however, whenever field (or historical structure) and habitus (or its actual bodily enactment through dispositions) are out of sync. Social inappropriateness ensues in such cases. Situations arise in which actors are *awkward*, or “quixotic,” as their habitus is no longer compatible with the rules and norms that govern the particular field. This disconnection, or mismatch,²⁵⁵ which is called hysteresis due to its connotations of lag and delay,²⁵⁶ makes it possible for actors that experience the anomaly to respond to it in two distinct ways. One is to reconfirm

²⁵⁴ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 7.

²⁵⁵ Michael Strand and Omar Lizardo, “The Hysteresis Effect: Theorizing Mismatch in Action,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 47, no. 2 (June 2017): 164–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12117>.

²⁵⁶ Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 113 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48.

the rules and norms that support the field by casting out transgressive behavior. In this option, the deviancy is not strong enough to provoke a wholesale reconsideration of the social space. Instead, it exerts a conservative effect because dominant social actors further cement the social space by investing in its reproduction. The other option is to reconstitute the field itself with the anomaly in its center, rendering it as the *new normal* according to which the social space is rearranged.

This means that there are at least two *entry points* to think about practical change. First, because practical agency is never a mirror reflection of its background knowledge, the enactment itself is structurally imbued with uncertainty and ambiguity. This opens up room for misinterpretation and misreading. There is a need, therefore, to recognize a particular performance as belonging to a particular practice for it to be reproduced over time. Second, because those signifiers according to which practices are enacted can change, practices can be both competent and incompetent if assessed by different communities of practice.

The advantage of a practice approach is that it leaves no doubt as to the empirical focus of inquiry. Practices, or “patterned ways of doing things internationally,”²⁵⁷ are what to look for and examine. This is both a clear stance and one that needs further specification. Analysis is particularly challenging if the objective is not simply to register and account for practices as they are enacted, but to *work backwards* to try and excavate the underlying habitus informing them. Habitus is not directly visible, its *social effects* are.²⁵⁸ A related danger is to fall into a tautological trap, as if anyone who makes bourgeois choices is explained as possessing a “petty bourgeois habitus.” To guard against such a collapse, the internal structure of a habitus must be held “*separate* from a

²⁵⁷ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson et al., “Symposium: The Practice Turn in International Relations” (Harvard Dataverse, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NXX3JJ>.

²⁵⁸ Maton, “Habitus,” 62.

description of the practices it gives rise.”²⁵⁹ This requires an attention to the possible diversity of habitus in any social field, and how social actors sort out, if at all, what kind of behavior is most appropriate in it. To take the language game perspective of Frost and Lechner, this means searching for the meaning of a practice’s constitutive rules “as differentiated from the meaning of the constitutive rules of other practices.”²⁶⁰

This warning points in the direction of the question of competence, whereby habitus is *matched* with field and thereby leads to particular practices. It also brings attention to the notion of hysteresis, denoting situations in which habitus is out of sync with the social field, producing practices that are quixotic. At issue in this discussion, then, is also the question of competence versus incompetence. It brings to the forefront the need to theorize practical mismatches or anomalies, and their potential for inducing change. Diplomacy, in the approach of Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, is a process in which actors compete with one another to sort out what is competent diplomatic behavior and what is incompetent. But this focus on competent performances, warn Duvall and Chowdhury, risks ignoring *incompetent* ones. As practices are social and structural (competent) as well as agentic and material (performative), competence can only be assessed “in relation to existing norms and mores,”²⁶¹ even though these standards are often transgressed by incompetent practices. Incompetence results if the socially expected taking place of a performance is considered incompatible with its linguistic structure or background knowledge. For an epistemic community relying on an alternative background knowledge, however, this very same performance

²⁵⁹ Maton, “Habitus,” 62.

²⁶⁰ Mervyn Frost and Silviya Lechner, “Two Conceptions of International Practice: Aristotelian *Praxis* or Wittgensteinian *Language-Games*?,” *Review of International Studies* 42, no. 2 (April 2016): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210515000169>.

²⁶¹ Raymond D. Duvall and Arjun Chowdhury, “Practices of Theory,” in *International Practices*, eds. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 349, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862373.019>.

can be deciphered as competent rather than incompetent. The analytical purchase of focusing on incompetence is brought out through a triangulation between practices, their signifiers, and the subjects they bring about. As Duvall and Chowdhury explain:

“There are instances, however, where actors either reflexively or self-consciously act incompetently in order to establish their identity – or, more precisely, their identity itself is constituted by departing from what would constitute “competent performance.””²⁶²

The question of (in-)competence points to a discussion of difference and the central role it plays in the process of change. In fact, it is argued that difference is the missing piece that helps bring out the potential of practical theorizing in making sense of change. With a recent article, Ted Hopf significantly contributed to furthering such an understanding. Hopf argued that the focus on the unreflective aspect of practices in much of the practice turn led to most studies positing no more than the possibility of change, a kind of “incremental and marginal” change in and through practice that is rather insignificant.²⁶³ This is what informs the *wiggle room* claim in Adler and Pouliot. To repeat, what is subsumed under the same category of practice are never objectively identical performances. There is variation from one instantiation to the next, but they remain sufficiently similar to be socially recognized as falling within the scope of their practice category. Hopf emphasizes the requirement of coherence or social aptness in producing this effect of identity. Though “the social world is ontologically objectively unique,” the default setting for social actors is to experience “meaningful similarity.”²⁶⁴ The wiggle room in agency, responsible for producing these minor differences in enactment, is thus a possible mechanism for change but one that very

²⁶² Duvall and Chowdhury, “Practices of Theory,” 341.

²⁶³ Hopf, “Change in International Practices.” 94.

²⁶⁴ Hopf, “Change in International Practices.” 696.

often remains muted. It tends not to materialize because the difference is not registered by social agents as destabilizing. Instead, it is *glossed over*.

Unreflective habits explain much of what happens in social life, but they also make possible a more meaningful and consequential kind of change. Because practical agency is the default setting and the prevalent way in which people proceed, it also frees up “humans to reflect.”²⁶⁵ The kind of change made possible by reflection is called reflective or discursive agency, or change in practice through reflection, as opposed to the unreflective or practical, or change in practice through practice. Since reflection is clearly not triggered in the overwhelming majority of cases, the key question is why reflection becomes necessary or socially required in certain practices and not others. To answer, Hopf resorts to a well-known argument in the literature that practices operate until they *do not*.²⁶⁶ A crude functionalist claim at first sight, practices defy this kind of logic. Instead, the idea is that practices survive as long as they cohere, or serve adequately a particular purpose. A bundle of practices thus follows and reproduces its script or pattern because they are *fitted together*, or yoked, in such a way.²⁶⁷ In turn, it is the breaking down of this coherence, or the Bourdieusian objective intentionality, that warrants and creates space for reflection.

Put differently, the trigger moment for reflection is created by developments experienced as indicating a disruption in the habitual operation of the social space. Since reflection has no inherent direction, however, these anomalies are no guarantee of change. To assess its probability, a number of scope conditions present themselves that can increase or decrease the likelihood of change. Key among them is what Hopf calls “meaningful and effective difference.” Meaningful refers to the

²⁶⁵ Hopf, “Change in International Practices,” 689.

²⁶⁶ As noted above, Abbott puts forward a similar claim, notably that social entities operate until they no longer satisfy in a practical sense.

²⁶⁷ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 20–21.

intelligibility of difference, or its susceptibility to being deciphered as such, while effective means that it “must offer a plausible and viable alternative to the current reality.”²⁶⁸ These features inform two conditions for identifying the *proper* kind of difference, or what Hopf loosely calls the “sweet spot.”²⁶⁹ On the one hand, an infinitesimal kind of difference easily passes under the radar of the taken-for-grantedness of the social space, while radical difference is too abnormal and unusual to serve as a mirror for reflection. The former is neutralized under the inertia of everyday practices, and the latter is deemed irrelevant and thus leads to social *indifference*. Therefore, these extremes refer to *impotent* differences from the perspective of practical change. Though both reflexivity and difference are implicated in practical change, the exact relationship between them and the dynamic leading to change is unclear. In the next section, this relationship is to be further specified.

²⁶⁸ Hopf, “Change in International Practices,” 697.

²⁶⁹ Hopf, “Change in International Practices,” 704.

3.5. *The relational turn in social inquiry and IR*

Studies that identify social relations as the stuff of reality to be analyzed and explored are associated with the literature on relational sociology,²⁷⁰ as well as its representatives in the study of world politics.²⁷¹ Mustafa Emirbayer's work is a common point of departure for thinking about relational sociology. His 1997 manifesto continues to have a catalyzing effect on the literature by having identified the major stakes involved in developing a relational understanding of social life and forging approaches well-equipped to explore it. Emirbayer's analytical dichotomy is that between substantialism and relationalism, two philosophical traditions at loggerheads with one another by virtue of their respective conceptualizations of social life and its relationship with its underlying parts. The former approaches the social world as consisting of substances or static things, while the latter emphasizes processes and unfolding relations as its primary *units*.²⁷² A fundamental claim in relational sociology is that terms and units cannot be held constant or singled out as variables because "their meanings, significance, and identity" derive from a "dynamic, unfolding process."²⁷³ The occurrence of these processes is ontologically prior to the elements constituted in and through them. The implication of this approach is not only that "there is no doer before the deed,"²⁷⁴ but also that the momentary snapshots in which basic units are said to take

²⁷⁰ François Dépelteau, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Christopher Powell and François Dépelteau, eds., *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology: Ontological and Theoretical Issues* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US : Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Anya Topolski, *Arendt, Levinas and a Politics of Relationality, Reframing the Boundaries* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015).

²⁷¹ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (September 1999): 291–332.

²⁷² Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (September 1997): 281.

²⁷³ Emirbayer, "Manifesto," 287.

²⁷⁴ Duvall and Chowdhury, "Practices of Theory," 338.

their essential form for the sake of substantialist analysis are meaningless. Social inquiry, in its relationally rectified form, must start in and from the web of relations and processes.

The challenges to be tackled by a robust relational research program are considerable. Key among them is the issue of boundary-drawing. If analysis is to begin from relations rather than substances, then it becomes “notoriously difficult to justify the empirical boundaries” identified by the researcher.²⁷⁵ To specify beforehand the substance of things risks resulting in “clearly demarcated units of study,” and such an essentialization process is at odds with the ontological primacy of relations.²⁷⁶ The solution offered is to shift the *burden of proof*, so to speak, to the social actors themselves. Accordingly, a particular network of relations can be subjected for analysis as long as it is a “social fact” and “consciously experienced as such by the actors composing it.”²⁷⁷ Abbott makes a similar claim in writing that “local interaction gradually tosses up stable properties defining two sides.”²⁷⁸ These are so-called proto-boundaries, to be drawn together by social actors to create proper boundaries *of something*. Rather than carving up social life into arbitrary categories driven by analytical convenience, attention is refocused on those social contexts that are *already* arranged in a particular way. If social actors create and structure their environment, then this is as reasonable an empirical entry point as available.

Debates over boundary-drawing underwrite the absence of consensus over an ontological core in relational sociology. That relational sociology remains a “patchwork of knowledge about social

²⁷⁵ Emirbayer, “Manifesto,” 304.

²⁷⁶ This is no small risk as the relational ambition is to counteract the eclecticism that comes with the „easy mixing together of substantialist and relational assumptions.” Emirbayer, “Manifesto,” 282.

²⁷⁷ Emirbayer, “Manifesto,” 303.

²⁷⁸ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 863.

relations” rather than a coherent paradigm holds valid for many of its contributors.²⁷⁹ Prandini notes in this regard the lack of a “great congruence” among contributors at the ontological level.²⁸⁰ For Eacott, however, this absence of a consensus is not a shortcoming but a logical feature of relational sociology. If the objective is to analyze social life through the “complexity and messiness” of its relations, then the search for an essence, as though it were an entity, is counterintuitive.²⁸¹ For many followers, taking relations seriously thus means resisting efforts to embrace a disciplinary straitjacket. One example of this trend is a growing research tradition in contemporary IR that works to critically cross-fertilize non-Western and Western IR literatures,²⁸² in order to generate a new disciplinary setting that is as “necessarily contextual, incoherent, and socially mediated” as the diverse phenomena underlying its focus of inquiry.²⁸³ At the intersections of different approaches and philosophies of science, studies focusing on relations embrace, rather than try to overcome or sterilize, the non-essentialism of this kind of literature. Ontological disorderliness is, therefore, an *inherent* feature of relationalism, not a sign of scientific impropriety.

²⁷⁹ François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell, “Introduction,” in *Applying Relational Sociology: Relations, Networks, and Society*, ed. François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell, 1st ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xvi.

²⁸⁰ Riccardo Prandini, “Relational Sociology: A Well-Defined Sociological Paradigm or a Challenging ‘Relational Turn’ in Sociology?,” *International Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2014.997969>.

²⁸¹ Eacott, *Beyond Leadership*, 38.

²⁸² Qin Yaqing, “Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory,” *Social Sciences in China* 30, no. 4 (November 2009): 5–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529200903342560>; Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109657>; Astrid H M Nordin and Graham M Smith, “Reintroducing Friendship to International Relations: Relational Ontologies from China to the West,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, June 22, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcy011>; Chengxin Pan, “Toward a New Relational Ontology in Global Politics: China’s Rise as Holographic Transition,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, June 1, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcy010>; Astrid H. M. Nordin et al., “Towards Global Relational Theorizing: A Dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone Scholarship on Relationalism,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 570–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1643978>; Yaqing Qin and Astrid H. M. Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 601–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1641470>.

²⁸³ Emilian Kavalski, “Guanxi or What Is the Chinese for Relational Theory of World Politics,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, June 3, 2018, 416, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcy008>.

In the discipline of IR, Jackson and Nexon provided one of the first articulations of a relational analysis,²⁸⁴ to be followed by a more recent, albeit philosophically identical, intervention.²⁸⁵ Once there is a commitment that the world is “composed of processes and relations,” it is both undesirable and impossible to develop causal theories of it, or to break it down into “discrete variables.”²⁸⁶ Building a processual relational approach, they argue that both substance and relations are relevant in describing a social object, even though none of them can “exhaust the object itself.” Rather, substantialist and relationalist claims need to be embedded in “theoretical systems of interpretation” to gain significance, even as they inevitably remain “unequal to the phenomenon itself.”²⁸⁷ Thus, in making sense of the object of inquiry, an attention to both substances and relations is warranted, while keeping in mind that no such analytical triangulation will ever fully *cover* the social phenomenon in question.

Jackson and Nexon develop an analytical apparatus that consists of four concepts: processes, configurations, projects, and yoking. Processes are the nominal units of their relational analysis. Configurations are basically aggregated processes,²⁸⁸ but the differentiation is maintained to serve an analytical purpose not unlike the explanans-explanandum binary used in social inquiry.²⁸⁹ Then, processes add up into configurations, and they become projects once they acquire “agent properties, a social entity with the ability to make choices and exercise causal power.”²⁹⁰ Therefore, the change from configurations of processes to projects is key because it cements the *thingness* of

²⁸⁴ In a show of modesty, they merely claim to have provided relationalism with a “detailed statement” in IR. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, “Reclaiming the Social: Relationalism in Anglophone International Studies,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 587, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1567460>.

²⁸⁵ Jackson and Nexon, “Relations Before States”; Jackson and Nexon, “Reclaiming the Social.”

²⁸⁶ Jackson and Nexon, “Relations Before States,” 306.

²⁸⁷ Jackson and Nexon, “Relations Before States,” 292.

²⁸⁸ Jackson and Nexon, “Relations Before States,” 304.

²⁸⁹ Adler and Pouliot, “International Practices,” 18.

²⁹⁰ Jackson and Nexon, “Relations Before States,” 307.

the social object. In breaching ever higher levels of abstraction, however, the specter of reification appears, as the social object is further removed from its relational embeddedness. Cognizant of this distance, the authors provide an account of the experience of stateness, which is their empirical example, without assuming an underlying unit formed prior to or irrespective of its social ties and relations. In the next section, yoking is further explored to make it work for the analytical framework of diplomatic normalization.

3.6. *Yoking*

The concept of yoking rounds out the analytical apparatus for Jackson and Nexon. Drawing on the work of Andrew Abbott, yoking is employed in reference to a particular social mechanism through which the effect of social thingness is created, changed, and maintained. In Abbott's approach, the basic *unit* of relational analysis is a mere site of difference, which "emerges from local cultural negotiations."²⁹¹ These sites of difference are attributed to parts that are in fact "events, instantaneous and unique."²⁹² Amidst a kind of social randomness, these sites are inchoate, and thus are yet to be formed as boundaries of something. This rudimentary social space, or "unstructured turf,"²⁹³ begins to change through yoking: "The making of an entity is simply the connecting up of these local oppositions and differences into a single whole that has the quality which I call "thingness."²⁹⁴ It works by drawing together things, leading to a "connection of two or more proto-boundaries such that one side of each become defined as "inside" the same entity."²⁹⁵ The success of any yoking attempt depends on its endurance, to be further broken down into internal reproduction (1), and social causation (2). If boundaries are brought together in a meaningful way, the arrangement acquires its status of thingness. It begins, then, to reproduce itself by inaugurating a realm of intelligibility that provides meaning and informs action, inviting adherence by actors co-existing in this social arrangement.

Yoking may also entail the destruction of previously established boundaries and a rearrangement of an existing social space.²⁹⁶ In such a scenario, prior demarcations of difference are reformed

²⁹¹ Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," 863.

²⁹² Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," 863.

²⁹³ Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," 880.

²⁹⁴ Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," 870.

²⁹⁵ Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," 871.

²⁹⁶ Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," 872.

because that which holds them together, their old social purpose, is seen to be no longer tenable. Actors engaged in such an overhaul seek to achieve, in line with the criteria of successful yoking, an experience of thingness at the level of this prospective entity. Some attempts lead to a new social space able to instantiate and discharge meaning, but many others fall short. Constantly in flux, sites of difference never crystallize in social things fully immune to challenges launched by actors dissatisfied with the status quo. Yet, prospective entities often remain embryonic because they fail to reach the degree of formedness required for reproduction and social causation. The litmus test in this regard is that they “must satisfy,”²⁹⁷ but not in the sense of being optimal, best, or rational. Rather, it is their social defensibility, their compatibility with a broadly defined social purpose, that secures compliance from a multitude of actors. It is also this cohesiveness that protects against “redefinition out of existence by other entities.”²⁹⁸

At play in these processes of yoking is therefore a logic of *recursive triangulation*. Changes in social purpose correspond to the ways in which sites of difference are articulated and encapsulated, and sites of difference transform by virtue of the rationale according to which they are yoked and re-yoked over time. Triangulation is meant to indicate that change is possible only from within the social context, and transformation is endemic to it. Recursivity describes the iterative character of the procedure of yoking, and the cumulative outcome reached by repeated sequences of yoking processes.

The drawing-together associated with yoking is, for Abbott, also a metaphor to explain the very generative principle through which social science knowledge is produced and reproduced. The term fractal heuristics, to which Abbott commits a chapter full of empirical examples in his

²⁹⁷ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 877.

²⁹⁸ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 878.

Methods of Discovery,²⁹⁹ is meant to denote a kind of boundary-crossing whereby divides of sociological analysis are creatively transgressed for the sake of new knowledge. A fractal is “simply something that looks the same no matter how close we get to it,” an example of it being the woodland fern whose leaves consist of little ferns,³⁰⁰ thereby reproducing the same pattern and leading to self-similarity. Abbott argues that the great debates of social science divide the discipline into camps of realists and constructionists, behaviorists and culturalists, along with other such binaries. Importantly, these dichotomies also inform debates *within* each of these camps, leading to the same structural phenomenon no matter the level of investigation. This feature is therefore the very logic of a method widely employed to push the discipline forward. In Abbott’s perspective, fractal heuristics are at play whenever researchers venture across the aisle, into nominally forbidden terrain, that they “produce new questions and new problems.”³⁰¹ In this sense, fractal heuristics is a conceptual metaphor that refers to method integration.³⁰² In contrast, social science suffers in the absence of fractal innovation. For instance, the lack of a synthesis between history and sociology is one such example, whose story Abbott refers to as “the story of the mutual enlightenment that never happened.”³⁰³

This thesis approaches practices as ontological phenomena.³⁰⁴ They are always in flux, and it is in social awareness only that they acquire a quality of continuity rather than change. Going about in

²⁹⁹ Andrew Abbott, *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*, Contemporary Societies (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004).

³⁰⁰ Abbott, *Methods of Discovery*, 162–63.

³⁰¹ Abbott, *Methods of Discovery*, 165.

³⁰² Felix Knappertsbusch, “‘Fractal Heuristics’ for Mixed Methods Research: Applying Abbott’s ‘Fractal Distinctions’ as a Conceptual Metaphor for Method Integration,” *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 14, no. 4 (October 2020): 456–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689819893573>.

³⁰³ Andrew Abbott, “History and Sociology: The Lost Synthesis,” *Social Science History* 15, no. 2 (1991): 230, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S014555320002109X>.

³⁰⁴ Jorg Kustermans, “Parsing the Practice Turn: Practice, Practical Knowledge, Practices,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 2 (January 2016): 182, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829815613045>.

social life is a never-ending quest to fix the unfixable, to tame the untamable, to always relate and adjust, in short, meaning to practice and *vice versa*. Kustermans describes why the concept of practice is in and of itself *impotent*: “[b]ecause of its ontological nature, it is a necessary condition for everything (it is always there), but a sufficient explanation for *nothing*.”³⁰⁵ This explains the reliance on concepts *other than* practice in empirical applications inspired by the practice turn. Doty focuses on discursive arrangements in which practices are intelligible and embedded,³⁰⁶ and Adler uses the notion of meaning investment through which practices are institutionalized in social life.³⁰⁷ These interventions are, therefore, *agentic*.³⁰⁸ They denote instruments social actors use to temper with the social field in a way congruent with their preferences. Since practices never cohere on their own, they are *exposed* to such inferences.

This thesis claims that the process of yoking assists in a more robust rendering of practical change. Importantly, it helps make sense of the *agentic* aspect of it. For Abbott, the term ‘boundary’ is a misnomer because it assumes the existence of a prior entity made up of boundaries.³⁰⁹ If nothing is a boundary of anything at the start, then boundaries come to be as they are yoked by reference to a particular entity. Yaqing Qin criticizes Jackson and Nexon for presenting yoking as having a “mysterious” effect that produces entities without specifying the agentic aspect of this production.³¹⁰ He offers, instead, a properly social understanding of relations and emphasizes humans as “most creative, full of agency.”³¹¹ This agency is a function of what Qin calls “actor-

³⁰⁵ Kustermans, 183.

³⁰⁶ Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction.”

³⁰⁷ Emanuel Adler, “The Spread of Security Communities: Communities of Practice, Self-Restraint, and NATO’s Post—Cold War Transformation,” *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 2 (June 2008): 195–230, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108089241>.

³⁰⁸ Kustermans, “Parsing the Practice Turn,” 187.

³⁰⁹ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 861.

³¹⁰ Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 112, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316869505>.

³¹¹ Qin, *A Relational Theory*, 113.

context immanency,” or the totality of relations that “constitute the background against which an actor thinks and does.”³¹² In this approach, human agency becomes an expression of the social context that both constitutes the actor and is constituted by it.

In this thesis, diplomatic normalization does not simply *befall* on its participants. It is, therefore, a type of change in which human agency is reasonably expected to play a key role. The focus on yoking implies that social entities, including relationships of a (non-)diplomatic kind, come about *via* an arrangement of boundaries that do not exist at the start. This means, as Abbott emphasizes, a process of “*imagining* boundaries without there being any entities for those boundaries to be boundaries of” (emphasis added).³¹³ This imagination is what makes diplomatic normalization a necessarily agentic enterprise. If a new state of affairs in a relationship comes to be *via* yoking, then this process is practically a *reimagination* by its participants of the practical purpose of the relationship.

³¹² Qin, *A Relational Theory*, 115.

³¹³ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 861.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter reviewed diplomacy as a practice, the practice turn, the relational turn, and the concept of yoking. If diplomacy is a practical-relational matter, then analysis must start in and from social relations rather than essentialized items. Practices help understand everyday habits as the actual *stuff* responsible for making it all hang together, or *Zusammenhang* in Schatzki's vocabulary.³¹⁴ Practices are cast as the locus of both change and permanence, implying that this held-togetherness can be robust *as well as* ephemeral. Dependent on practical rearticulation, fields disintegrate if their cohesiveness loses social salience catering to the actors' practical needs, or if actors realize their insufficiency and act towards overhauling them. In turn, fields are likely to endure if their generative principle remains hidden, and actors go about their daily business unproblematically. In short, the literature is peppered with propositions addressing the transformative and stabilizing potential of practices, or their *ordering* and *disordering* effects on social life.³¹⁵ Few analytical devices are available, however, to properly explore either of the two outcomes. This state of affairs is because practice theory is geared more towards making sense of social reproduction than of change and contingency.³¹⁶ Though the practice turn is unlikely to fail as a project,³¹⁷ the dilemma of practical change remains a considerable challenge.

To rectify this state of affairs, the chapter discussed the concept of yoking. Yoking is a mechanism through which practices are *made to cohere* with particular meanings. It implies that practices are

³¹⁴ Schatzki, *Social Practices*, 14.

³¹⁵ Jackson et al., "Symposium," 5–6.

³¹⁶ Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, "The Play of International Practice," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2015): 455–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12202>.

³¹⁷ Ringmar famously warned of such a possibility in the absence of what he sees as an indispensable theoretical synthesis. Erik Ringmar, "The Search for Dialogue as a Hindrance to Understanding: Practices as Inter-Paradigmatic Research Program," *International Theory* 6, no. 1 (March 2014): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971913000316>.

not inherently meaningful. Instead, social actors invest in arranging them by reference to a practical purpose, and it is the intersubjectively accepted correspondence to this purpose that leads to stable, rather than unstable, practices. But yoking offers more than just a way to account for stability and change in social life. It brought attention to the *centrality of human agency* in perpetuating a state of affairs or transforming it. If everyday practices are stabilized, people reproduce them in their usual undertakings by tacitly *re-yoking* the practical objective they serve. If everyday practices are destabilized, people stop enacting them because they recognize that the practical objective they used to serve no longer holds. In this situation, the question of *what the practical objective is* is made explicit, rather than implicit, and subject for critical interrogation. If social actors are successful in unyoking the old objective and yoking a new one in its stead, practical change takes place, and a new state of affairs results.

What this review did not account for is the *impetus for change*. In its absence, the imperative to yoke something anew may imply a kind of *deus ex machina*. It seems to come about through a divine intervention, with the misleading message that its origin is located outside social relations, and which renders the previous state of affairs nonsensical and untenable at once. This *asocial* genesis story would be incompatible with the premises of a relational-processual analysis. The question, therefore, is the social condition in which a *re-yoking of the status quo* is more, rather than less, likely to take place. The next chapter settles this question, and introduces the analytical framework of diplomatic normalization. It argues that strangeness is the social condition in which *diplomatic imagination* (re-yoking) is both necessary and possible. Strangeness is the source of the indispensable agentic impetus pulling in the direction of diplomatic normalization.

4. Diplomatic Normalization *via* Strangership: Towards an Analytical Framework

4.1. Introduction

Chapter 3 argued that if (non-)diplomatic relationships are social arrangements serving practical purposes, these relationships can either endure or transform depending on the *coherence* between dominant practices and the corresponding meanings they have. It was claimed that yoking is the mechanism through which this coherence is either reproduced or undermined. This implies that the absence of diplomatic normalization is sustained if its participants *yoke* it as a practical-rational state of affairs serving a practical objective. In turn, this absence is interrogated if participants stop *re-yoking* it as serving the same old practical objective.

This chapter concludes the conceptual survey started in chapter 2. It argues that strangeness is the context in which re-yoking becomes both necessary and possible. Strangeness is the social condition supporting a *diplomatic re-imagination* of a non-diplomatic relationship. This means that though diplomatic normalization is a bilateral affair, the agentic impetus triggering diplomatic change can be a unilateral one. While it takes two to act on a new, diplomatic understanding of the relationship, the desirability of doing so can emanate from one party having recognized the *impracticality* of the absence of diplomatic normalization.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the concept of the stranger and the experience of *estrangement* are discussed. It is argued that estrangement is the social condition of reflexivity. It denotes the explicit recognition that choosing a particular course of action rather than another is politically consequential for what results in social life. Second, a brief synopsis is presented of the conceptual argument developed across the previous three chapters. In the third part, the individual stages of the analytical framework are introduced, and the sequence between them is specified and explained. The framework consists of three stages: estrangement from the status quo (1),

conceptualization of a new practical purpose (2), and enactment of diplomatic change (3). Fourth, and finally, a short discussion is offered to specify the role the framework plays in the empirical analysis of US-China rapprochement.

4.2. *From the stranger to strangership*

In this part of the chapter, the notion of estrangement is developed by first looking at the social figure of the stranger, originally formulated by German sociologist Georg Simmel. Then, subsequent appraisals of the stranger are discussed, with a view of making sense of the stranger not simply as a particular social figure but as one that is part of social relations as such. This shift from the stranger to *strangership*, or the relationship formed by strangers, sets the stage for appraising diplomats as strangers *par excellence*. It invites a conceptualization of the diplomatic meeting as an intersubjective exercise that starts from strangership but is meant to build upon, and go beyond, it for the sake of dialogue. This interpretation is related to the post-classical notion of diplomatic culture. In this chapter, it denotes not the common stock of ideas and institutions shared by members of diplomatic representatives acting on behalf of sovereign states. Rather, it stands for a particular *technique of encounter* in diplomacy, which is the core of what Sharp calls *encounter culture*.³¹⁸ Finally, the sociology of the stranger is linked to the particular challenge entailed in the diplomatic encounter. This challenge is to meet with the stranger in the slimmest of social contexts and to manage mutual strangeness in the direction of sustainable diplomatic dialogue.

Georg Simmel sculpted the figure of the stranger at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite the occasional reference to it in the rest of Simmel's work, the stranger took his basic shape in no more than a 6-page essay.³¹⁹ This excursus, brief as well as insightful, set the stage for subsequent contributions in sociology for borrowing, reappraising, and further theorizing the stranger in ways

³¹⁸ Paul Sharp, "The Idea of Diplomatic Culture and Its Sources," in *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy*, ed. Hannah Slavik (Malta Geneva: DiploFoundation, 2004), 361–79.

³¹⁹ In this literature, the stranger is referred to as a male individual. He is a man by virtue of his relative pronouns. This author is cognizant that this choice is arbitrary. However, for the sake of consistency between quotations and chapter text, he adheres to this problematic practice.

expanding the boundaries of its initial formulation. For Simmel, the stranger's particular social position, along with the rest of the qualities peculiar to him, has to do with *social distance*. To grasp his fundamental spirit, Simmel writes that the stranger is a "potential wonderer,"³²⁰ the individual who has not quite overcome the "freedom of coming and going."³²¹ The activity of moving around at will is connected to a sense of liberation, the feeling of not being fixed. This liberation is meant not only in a spatial sense, as the vagabond life associated with the stranger disguises a rich metaphor. It denotes the possession of *more* freedoms socially, particularly in comparison with people that settle unambiguously in a social space – the non-strangers.³²²

Simmel articulates the figure of the stranger as the synthesis of closeness and remoteness. In a spatial sense, the stranger is approximate to the members of the social group, but socially distant from the norms and conventions informing their way of life. Having come from *another place*, he embodies qualities "that are not, and cannot be, indigenous" to the social setting in which he finds himself.³²³ Therefore, he remains the "outsider within,"³²⁴ and this mobility constitutes him as the unity of "nearness and distance."³²⁵ Rooted in this peculiar standing are the qualities associated with the stranger, key among them the sense of *objectivity*. The concept refers, in this case, not to passivity and detachment, but a particular mixture of "indifference and involvement."³²⁶ The stranger is he who is involved *despite* being indifferent. This kind of objectivity accrues in

³²⁰ Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950), 402.

³²¹ Simmel, "The Stranger," 402.

³²² For more on the relationship between strangerhood and freedom, see Vince Marotta, "Zygmunt Bauman: Order, Strangerhood and Freedom," *Thesis Eleven* 70, no. 1 (August 2002): 36–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513602070001005>.

³²³ Simmel, "The Stranger," 143.

³²⁴ Mervyn Horgan, "Strangers and Strangership," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33, no. 6 (December 2012): 610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2012.735110>.

³²⁵ Simmel, "The Stranger," 404.

³²⁶ Simmel, "The Stranger," 404.

proportion to the social distance the stranger maintains towards the social group. The stranger is “bound by no commitments,” unconstrained by “habit, piety, and precedent.”³²⁷ He remains “not organically connected, through established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation,” with any of the members of the social group.³²⁸ The stranger is the host of a “third type of consciousness,”³²⁹ of historical knowledge unique to his social standing.

The stranger’s gaze is targeted at aspects pertaining to a social order around which members of a group cohere. Because of his social distance, much of what is taken to be the common stock of a community appears *odd* from the stranger’s perspective. This “cultural pattern of the group life” is, in the words of Alfred Schütz, has “the authority of a tested system of recipes,”³³⁰ but the stranger recognizes no such authority in them. For members of the social group, this thinking-as-usual works by relying unquestionably on these recipes, a common practice that makes sense for the following reasons.³³¹ First, history is taken to be repetitive, implying that the future is much like the past, making old solutions applicable to contemporary problems. Second, the knowledge imparted to future generations stood the test of time, even if the origins of such knowledge are unclear. Third, knowledge about general, rather than specific, types of events is sufficient to go by in everyday existence. Fourth, these assumptions are held in common by a large number of people. They are not subjective and if people abide by them, they have a “reasonable chance of understanding and of being understood.”³³² Ordinary members are born into these assumptions, and they embody them in their everyday behavior. Coming from a different place, the stranger

³²⁷ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 405.

³²⁸ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 404.

³²⁹ Vince Marotta, “Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the Sociology of Knowledge,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33, no. 6 (December 2012): 678, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2012.739136>.

³³⁰ Alfred Schütz, “The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology,” *Collected Papers II*, ed. Arvid Brodersen, *Phaenomenologica* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1976), 96, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-1340-6>.

³³¹ Schütz discusses them at some length in a paragraph on page 96. Schütz, “The Stranger: An Essay,” 96.

³³² Schütz, “The Stranger: An Essay,” 95.

needs to *translate* between his prior experience and the one he registers in encountering this new group. In doing so, the social order is seen not as a “field of his actual and possible acts” in which to immerse, but as an “object of his thinking.”³³³ This shift from the level of social action to the level of theoretical observation is what produces the critical potential associated with strangeness. In other words, being engaged in such an investigation is the practical equivalent of being reflexive. It means an explicit realization of the inevitability of *having to* make choices in social behavior, and knowing that such choices are pregnant with the kind of social reality thereby construed.

The sociological tradition building on Simmel’s concept of the stranger is considerable. The ways in which the stranger has been coopted, however, are not always compatible with its original formulation.³³⁴ Evidently, authors are hardly in control of the particular afterlife their conceptual innovations have, but in the case of the stranger this is compounded with the similarity of the concept with related notions. A key property often lost in reappraisals is the element of social strangeness *being nurtured and cherished* by the stranger himself. As Levine reminds, Simmel’s figure of the stranger “does not aspire to be assimilated.”³³⁵ This sets the stranger apart from social figurations in which there is a clear ambition to secure recognition from social peers and status among them.³³⁶ Such is the predicament of the marginal man, for instance, intent on becoming a full-fledged member of his group though not quite able to close the gap because of his divided

³³³ Schütz, “The Stranger: An Essay,” 92.

³³⁴ McLemore’s critique of the sociological offshoots of the stranger is an insightful analysis of how the concept has been re-appropriated and turned into a synonym of other notions of social figures hardly resonant with Simmel’s original treatment. S. Dale McLemore, “Simmel’s ‘Stranger’: A Critique of the Concept,” *The Pacific Sociological Review* 13, no. 2 (April 1970): 86–94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388311>.

³³⁵ Donald N. Levine, “Simmel at a Distance: On the History and Systematics of the Sociology of the Stranger,” *Sociological Focus* 10, no. 1 (January 1977): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.1977.10570274>.

³³⁶ Schütz claims that the stranger is in personal crisis, a man without a history. He is someone, therefore, not at peace with his social standing in life. Indeed, Schütz’s concern is primarily with the process of inquiry through which the stranger examines the approached group. Schütz, *Collected Papers II*, 97.

loyalties. In contrast, the trader – Simmel’s archetypal stranger – is a traveler across different communities, being close to each without *settling* in any of them. Importantly, he is *at home* despite being on the move socially and normatively, though not always spatially.

Social geography, or the structural position of the stranger in society, tends to be prioritized to explain the emergence of the stranger.³³⁷ Temporality is of secondary importance. The amount of time spent by the stranger in the host community is not the primary yardstick for measuring the quality of strangeness itself. The stranger is to be differentiated, then, from the ‘newcomer.’ In Levine’s typology, these two figures are similar in the friendly disposition they have towards the host community, but the newcomer seeks to be a member of it, whereas the stranger is content with mere *residence*.³³⁸ This difference in social purpose is telling of the role time plays in their respective ambitions. The newcomer is interested in approximation with the ultimate objective of assimilation, and time works to his advantage as he becomes more adept at mimicking and internalizing the norms and conventions of the target community. The stranger, however, is *not dissatisfied* with his remoteness *vis-à-vis* the social group of which he remains a part more by happenstance than by close identification. He does not seek to escape his predicament, making the passing of time largely irrelevant to who he is or who he wishes to become. In this sense, he is more akin to the sojourner, who “has no desire for full participation in the community life of his adopted land.”³³⁹

Much of the literature starts from an understanding of the stranger as a singular social figure, an individual. But the relationships of which the stranger is a member are, evidently, also defined by

³³⁷ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Rethinking Strangeness: From Structures in Space to Discourses in Civil Society,” *Thesis Eleven* 79, no. 1 (November 2004): 87–104, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513604046959>.

³³⁸ Levine, “Simmel at a Distance,” 23.

³³⁹ Paul C. P. Siu, “The Sojourner,” *American Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 1 (July 1952): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1086/221070>.

an element of strangeness. The stranger's relationship with someone else is characterized by ties that "connect [them] only because they connect a great many people."³⁴⁰ These features belong to broad categories, whereby similarity or sameness is limited to a national, social, or occupational commonality. If nothing else, then the humanity of the two individuals may construe them as *alike*, but it does not change the basic strangeness underlying the relationship.³⁴¹ Horgan refers to such relations as *strangerness*, a relationship of strangers.³⁴² While a friendship is characterized by "mutual recognition of shared specific characteristics," strangerness is produced by relying on the "most general characteristics."³⁴³ Friends embody traits that are particular to them, and their relationship is geared towards an emphasis on social uniqueness. Their investment in each other is precisely because their bonds are unlike any other they may have with non-friends. Strangers, in contrast, have but the most universal traits connecting them, the slimmest of all available. The fragility, then, of strangerness is informed by the mutual indifference strangers exhibit towards one another. Unlike friends, they have no specific reasons attached to the relationship, making them *uninterested* in working to maintain it. Later in the chapter, it will be argued that this is the difficulty *specific* to the diplomatic profession: to nurture and deepen reasons for dialogue by defying the mutual indifference evident between its participants.

In producing strangerness, indifference is indispensable. Copresence, the mere sharing of "the same place at the same time" by two individuals,³⁴⁴ is a necessary but insufficient condition in this

³⁴⁰ Simmel, "The Stranger," 406.

³⁴¹ Simmel, "The Stranger," 406.

³⁴² Horgan seems to take for granted that any social relationship of which the stranger is a member *is* a strangerness, even if the other party is a properly integrated member of the social group. What helps bypass this latter possibility is his insistence on the stranger as a *relational* concept, which implies that the presence of a stranger in an interpersonal form of association *renders* the social context one of strangeness. Horgan, "Strangers and Strangerness," 608.

³⁴³ Horgan, "Strangers and Strangerness," 611.

³⁴⁴ Horgan, "Strangers and Strangerness," 614.

regard. That is, the recognition by *both* parties that they are strangers to one another is highly consequential. In Horgan's terminology, this refers to "mutual agreement about social distance."³⁴⁵ It is essentially an implicit consensus, a tacit understanding shared by self and other of the nature of the relationship. For instance, the sense that walking on the same street is *precisely* no more and no less than what connects self and other, needs to be accepted for strangership to emerge. Absent such recognition, the two individuals may be out of sync about who they *think* they are to each other. Given such a lack of fit, a possible consequence is social awkwardness: the experience of being approached by a stranger on the street who claims to know the self even though the self cannot identify the stranger as an acquaintance. The social field begins, in this case, not as a stable one, as the sense of indifference is not mutually registered. Though both parties are in copresence, one of them is socially *dissenting*: he enacts an alternative template with which to proceed in the social field. This disconnect between agents translates into a social structure in fundamental disarray.

Another scenario is equally plausible. Parties may be cognizant that they are strangers indeed, but are dissatisfied with the rudimentary character of the relationship. In this case, the starting point is strangership, but a common ambition crystallizes towards going beyond it. Doing so is, however, to enter socially treacherous terrain. Strangership provides certainty, and once it is abdicated for the sake of *more substantive* interaction, it ceases to function as a template helping participants differentiate between the reasonable, or practical-rational, and the unreasonable, or impractical-irrational. Participants jump into a social vacuum, making every move, every gesture, every deed take on a highly tentative quality. There is no reliable normative background to assist in deciphering what means what. If self and other are neither strangers anymore nor something else

³⁴⁵ Horgan, "Strangers and Strangership," 615.

yet, then what is to be done? Suspended in a transitory space between strangeness and its absence, the social structure is in free fall. There are only the hypotheses and guesses of the participants, and the behaviors they enact in line with their idiosyncratic interpretations, many of which bisect the social field, rather than unite it around a common purpose. An interactive back-and-forth follows, and self and other make an attempt to negotiate a repository of intelligible practices and the corresponding meanings they have. If these attempts are successful, the social field stabilizes: it *re-coheres* over an intersubjective purpose other than strangership. If unsuccessful, then the social field disintegrates, indicating to self and other that transcending their strangership is socially unfeasible.

4.3. *Stranger diplomats and diplomatic strangership*

The figure of the stranger has made some headways in diplomatic studies, though not as much as the exciting potential such a cross-fertilization may warrant. Among the few scholars who attempted to bring the two literatures together, Sofer famously made the case that the stranger is one of the historical personae of the diplomat,³⁴⁶ the other being the pathetic hero.³⁴⁷ What follows is an attempt to deepen the existing connections between strangeness and diplomacy. It is argued that doing so is possible *via* two moves of re-conceptualization. First, diplomats are to be framed *as* strangers *par excellence*. They are estranged, on the one hand, from their official counterparts speaking on behalf of a different community and enacting a lifeworld specific to it. They are estranged, on the other, from the *very* community they are sent abroad to represent. The second move is to draw out the implications of this *double* estrangement for the diplomatic encounter. If diplomacy is to succeed as the meeting of strangers, then both domestic and alien narratives, both self as well as other, must remain subject to continuous and critical interrogation. As argued above, the social distance peculiar to strangeness is productive of the reflexivity fueling such constant scrutiny.

The portrayal Sofer paints of the diplomat as a stranger is informed by the practical imperatives dictated by his profession. Cognizant of the distance between the political needs of his state and the “prejudices of his fellow countrymen,”³⁴⁸ the diplomat recognizes the dangers entailed in conformity with his society’s thinking. Popular opinion is always a poor compass, a distortion of the complexity characteristic of any issue of foreign policy. Driven by a myopic zeal, its advocates

³⁴⁶ Sofer, “The Diplomat as a Stranger.”

³⁴⁷ Sasson Sofer, “Being a ‘Pathetic Hero’ in International Politics: The Diplomat as a Historical Actor,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 12, no. 1 (March 2001): 107–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290108406191>.

³⁴⁸ Sofer, “The Diplomat as a Stranger,” 179.

are oblivious that the hallmarks of sound diplomacy are concession and compromise rather than brute force and unilateral imposition. Estranged from his home, the diplomat is further secluded because of the institutions serving his profession. The likelihood of his mission succeeding, along with his personal physical protection, inevitably put a premium on isolation. Like the trader, the diplomat is always on the move. He is a transgressor of ordinary boundaries and a member of an *international* family of kindred diplomats acting above and beyond national frontiers. The profession itself is *extraordinary* spatially, socially, as well as normatively. The “practice of his art,”³⁴⁹ then, is what renders the diplomat a foreigner to his very society.

The social distance integral to the diplomat’s identity is productive of the criticality associated with strangeness. By turning into an “interpreter both of his own society and of the society of his mission,” the diplomat is no longer a civil servant charged with the execution of policy, a simple vessel through which the national interest is communicated, a clerk who is greasing the wheels of diplomacy.³⁵⁰ He is, rather, a “challenger of accepted truths” and the harbinger of interpretations “not grounded in either society.”³⁵¹ Being strange is, therefore, being sufficiently removed from everyday social existence, to a degree freed from its dullness and empowered to think *beyond* what it accepts as patterned and legitimate. Once diplomats embrace their agency as full-fledged moral actors, rather than as mere instruments, efforts can be made “to inculcate into the other party some kind of vision of how things could be different.”³⁵² In the words of Sharp, diplomats

³⁴⁹ Sofer, “The Diplomat as a Stranger,” 179.

³⁵⁰ Adler-Nissen, “Just Greasing the Wheels?”

³⁵¹ Sofer, “The Diplomat as a Stranger,” 183.

³⁵² Iver B. Neumann, *Diplomatic Sites: A Critical Enquiry* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

“come close to pursuing their craft in its purest form when they represent what they judge to be *la raison de système* to the countries or other human collectivities which send and receive them.”³⁵³

In deploying their social distance to a good cause, diplomats are distinct in being “specialists in meaning.”³⁵⁴ They listen to their colleagues talking to them from across a different community. Foreign officials articulate alien narratives, speak of concerns and preferences specific to their needs and experiences, and express them not just verbally but symbolically, physically, and by way of sharing a diplomatic site.³⁵⁵ To properly understand them in the sense of accepting them as *different* as well as *legitimate*, diplomats come to realize the arbitrariness of the social norms and traditions underpinning their own existence. They accept them as belonging to a pool of possibilities, most of them incomparable if not incommensurable with each other. Cognizant of this irreducible diversity, diplomats turn into *pure* representatives. They are articulators of distant worlds sent by faraway capitals, but also architects of systems of exchange meant for crossing these different worlds *via* diplomacy.

If the diplomatic meeting hosts social strangers acting in an official capacity, then the challenge entailed in the diplomatic *encounter* is paradoxical. To repeat, social distance is the fuel driving diplomacy forward, with diplomats estranging from their societies as well as from each other. Strangeness does not exhaust the diplomatic dialogue, however, it merely sets the baseline for starting it. The specific exchanges that follow, their direction and substance, are what defines the longevity and character of the dialogue itself. Populating the diplomatic encounters with such

³⁵³ Paul Sharp, “Herbert Butterfield, the English School and the Civilizing Virtues of Diplomacy,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 4 (July 2003): 874, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00340>.

³⁵⁴ Gould-Davies, “The Intimate Dance of Diplomacy,” 1465.

³⁵⁵ Neumann, *Diplomatic Sites*.

meanings is for the participants themselves to do. Understood as *encounter* culture, diplomatic culture is most socially tangible at this stage, when participants

“talk to each other, possibly, but not necessarily, in such a way as to render [their] respective peoples less strange to one another.”³⁵⁶

Implicit in the encounter is the recognition that strangeness is ultimately a double-edged sword. Besides triggering the diplomatic dialogue, it may *undo* it if its participants fail to transcend strangership.

This dissertation claims that making each other less strange is not just possible, but *indispensable* if the diplomatic dialogue is to continue. Self and other in diplomacy need to articulate and nurture a common rationale that goes *against and beyond* strangeness. Because diplomatic strangers are unlike ordinary ones in social life, they cannot afford the luxury of divesting of a relationship at will. They are meant to enact the representation of entire communities, keeping in mind that the stakes of the diplomatic encounter are *superior* to the personal indifferences and antagonisms they may harbor towards each other. With the social superseding the individual, the diplomatic profession pulls in the direction of rendering mutual strangeness of *secondary* importance for the sake of dialogue.

Another reason not to settle for strangeness is the threat of *othering* lurking in the background of social distance. Overwhelmed by difference *only*, self and other may fix, rather than contest, their respective identities, making the diplomatic encounter sterile and its continuation pointless. To realize its transgressive potential, the diplomatic dialogue must be hospitable to understandings of both *meaningful similarity* and difference. Like the stranger embodying remoteness and closeness, self and other need to experience normative proximity in addition to social distance. In this view,

³⁵⁶ Sharp, “The Idea of Diplomatic Culture and Its Sources,” 373.

the diplomatic encounter acquires a dialectical and iterative logic by necessity. Once social distance is produced through the *double* estrangement of diplomats, this distance, too, needs to be estranged in the direction of normative similarity. The challenge, then, of the diplomatic encounter is to establish a feel for balancing between similarity and difference, to articulate and re-articulate self and other in terms *neither radically different nor fully the same*.

4.4. *Towards an analytical framework of diplomatic normalization*

This dissertation is interested in diplomatic normalization. In chapter 2, the starting question pertained to the two primary conditions for diplomacy to emerge – its necessity and possibility. It was found that the classical literature is focused on the functional indispensability of diplomacy, primarily in supporting the systemic purpose of coexistence and the realization and practice of sovereignty by individual states. It was also found that the post-classical literature shifted away from the classical state-centric perspective and reframed diplomacy as the mediation of difference between self and other in everyday social contexts. The emphasis on reflexivity impressed that the purpose of diplomacy cannot be exhausted by reference to systemic and state-level imperatives. Instead, diplomacy is better appraised as a social institution whose necessity is contingent on the ideas, norms, and practices specific to a particular relationship. It was posited that diplomacy is necessary if social actors realize the need for it and act upon such an understanding.

Chapter 3 reflected this new angle and explored diplomacy as a practical-relational matter. The puzzle animating this discussion was the dilemma of practical change, which is understood as the introduction of new ideas and concepts into settled practices. This is a clear challenge for the diplomatic practice. If diplomats never produce anything new,³⁵⁷ then the diplomatic profession is a sedimented practice that resists attempts to *think about change and enact it subsequently*. It was also argued that practices settle once they cohere around a particular social purpose, helping members of a social group decipher practices as compatible with accepted meanings. Assisting in

³⁵⁷ Iver B. Neumann, “‘A Speech That the Entire Ministry May Stand for,’ or: Why Diplomats Never Produce Anything New,” *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 2 (June 2007): 183–200, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2007.00012.x>.

this adjustment is the social mechanism of yoking, or the drawing of boundaries in social life as they pertain to a social purpose.

Chapter 4 started with a discussion of strangeness as the social condition of reflexivity. Because neither the necessity of diplomacy nor its possibility can be taken for granted, it was accepted that *to study diplomatic normalization is to theorize about the conditions in which deliberations over diplomatic change are possible and necessary*. It was argued that this *diplomatic imagination* is triggered in the context of reflexivity, and that this reflexivity is to be found in the strangeness generated by social distance. The stranger is the social figure with such distance at disposal. Subsequently, diplomats were recast as strangers *par excellence*. This recasting means that the diplomatic encounter can be approached as a specific kind of strangership whose participants start from social distance but are supposed to transcend it by working towards dialogue.

In summary, the conceptual argument developed in chapters 2, 3, and 4 leads to the following conclusion, to be expressed in a hypothetical form: *diplomatic normalization becomes necessary once social agents estrange from the status quo and reflexively articulate (yoke) a new moral purpose that commits social agents to work towards transcending the state of enmity and the absence of dialogue. Subsequently, it becomes possible once these social agents practically enact a new, diplomatic understanding of the relationship*. This hypothesis can be broken down into three phases: estrangement from the status quo (1), conceptualization of a new moral purpose (2), and enactment of diplomatic change (3). What follows is a discussion of each of these stages at some length. For the sake of simplicity, the first stage is referred to as estrangement, the second as conceptualization, and the third as enactment.

4.4.1. Stage 1 – Estrangement

In diplomacy, any bilateral relationship is governed by practices that imbue a state of affairs with a sense of normalcy. If dialogue has been absent from the relationship for a long time, then the prevalent set of practices, discursive and otherwise, fuels a realm of intelligibility making deviation from this order impracticable as well as inconceivable. The two parties actively but unconsciously re-yoke this rationale of no dialogue, and it acquires the character of a social entity by discharging meaning and feeding into the identity claims of self and other. The critical potential of whatever abnormality arises is rapidly extinguished, and rather than destabilize the status quo, it ends up contributing to its elasticity and endurance. More precisely, nothing can be acknowledged *as* an abnormality as long as the social order and its normative scaffolding are intact and perceived to be sufficient. Difference in identity is present, but it approximates a radical kind of difference, and it supports exclusionary narratives of self and other. In this setting, diplomacy serves as a one-way mirror. It refracts only those identity claims that frame dialogue as unnecessary because it is meaningless.

The thingness of this social order begins to change once social actors implicated in it start to realize that it no longer *serves* in a social-practical sense. The familiar discursive and other practices are not adequate anymore, and the old *purpose* having dominated the social space between self and other is brought into consciousness for interrogation. There are two ways in which social actors may arrive at this stage. The first opportunity can come about if actors experience a development whose signification they cannot coherently decipher under the reigning realm of intelligibility. Unless they are able to come to terms with its exceptional character, social actors begin to acknowledge the event as an anomaly. The very recognition of an anomaly is evidence of the implicit recognition of the *insufficiency* of the social order. The normalcy associated with the status

quo is compromised, and the social truths long taken to be axiomatic are exposed as illusions.³⁵⁸ Recognizing that established practices are nothing but “social necessity turned into nature,”³⁵⁹ a normative corrosion takes place as everyday practices are no longer enacted unreflexively. Once at this stage, the social order is in need of reform, even if the direction of subsequent efforts to reform it is unclear. Social actors may attempt to reinstall the status quo by fixing its normative and practical shortcomings. They can do so by *neutralizing* the surprise of the anomaly as compatible with the old state of affairs. The alternative is to seek to overhaul the social order by taking the anomaly as a starting point, the *kernel* around which a new normative structure of social order can cohere.

The second way in which the insufficiency of the social order is acknowledged is related to the first one. The two are interrelated, and they tend to unfold simultaneously because they are co-dependent. Together, they capture conditions in which a rethinking of the old social order is necessary as well possible. The first phenomenon pertained to the realization of an anomalous event and its incompatibility with the status quo. The second one is that social actors articulating such an event in terms of an anomaly do so because they experience *their own estrangement from the social order*. Fundamental norms and practices, long internalized and reproduced as a matter of course, acquire a character of strangeness. Social actors begin to perceive them as distant, out-of-the-way – removed, in short, from the realm of self-evidence.³⁶⁰ That which is taken for granted is defamiliarized, and the historical is brought to the surface for relitigation as a matter of

³⁵⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands (N.J.): Humanities Press, 1995), 84.

³⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 69.

³⁶⁰ Bloch, Halley, and Suvin, “Entfremdung, Verfremdung,” 121.

contemporary concern. Such distancing creates an opportunity to view what is externalized through a critical lens.

In casting off the habituality of the everyday, however, social actors come to realize that they are the very subjects of examination, not simply the social order. Estrangement is a reflexive experience, productive of confrontations with the social structure and the self. In articulating questions about the boundaries of the status quo, social actors are engaged in renegotiating the very terms of their existence. That is, if I am out of touch with the social structure, then who and what am I?

It is hypothesized that this estrangement is responsible for a normative-institutional condition with a key role to play in the process of diplomatic normalization. It makes necessary and possible a re-examination of the bilateral relationship because it allows the interrogation of its underlying moral purpose. If social truth is understood as “an unrecognized motivation serving an unacknowledged purpose,”³⁶¹ then exposing this link and how it conserves a particular status quo is a step towards its redefinition. As social actors note the anomalous character of a development and begin to experience the status quo as strange rather than familiar, the stage is set for this underlying purpose to be redefined. In other words, once social actors problematize, rather than take as self-evident, the rationale of no dialogue, there is normative space for thinking about alternatives.

Overall, both necessity and possibility are produced as conditions of emergence during this first stage. Having acknowledged the insufficiency of the status quo, social actors realize that its rethinking is *necessary*. Having unmasked its illusory normalcy, they carve out the normative

³⁶¹ Alasdair MacIntyre quoted in Bruce Cumings, “‘Revising Postrevisionism,’ or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 4 (1993): 543.

distance required to make such rethinking *possible*. At this point, change is possible as well as necessary, but the exact direction of it is not yet clear.

4.4.2. Stage 2 – Conceptualization

Conceptualization is that which produces a particular moral purpose in light of which identity claims between self and other are drawn and redrawn. The moral purpose is a normative compass and functions like a realm of intelligibility. Social actors articulate it as explaining the necessity, or lack thereof, of diplomatic dialogue in a bilateral relationship. Implicitly, it informs self and other about *who the other is and what is reasonable to do as a result of this understanding*. If the relationship is intersubjectively agreed to be one of enmity, then self and other are framed as enemies *par excellence*. If they are invested in re-yoking this understanding over time, then their boundaries are cemented in a way that makes diplomacy useless. The outcome is the agreed upon character of the relationship. This character can be enmity, friendship, alliance, partnership, or any other.

The adjective *moral* is used with a specific meaning. It denotes the idea that social actors are forced to make *value choices* as they deliberate about possible alternatives. It is the realization that space is available for a fundamental rethinking of the social order that infuses this process with a moral, ethical dimension. Estranged and reflexive, social actors are cognizant that their choices and decisions are *socially consequential*. They know that the task is not to *adjust* action with prefigured categories of socially legitimate behavior. Rather, it is to act with the recognition of *setting a precedent*. This awareness is what renders their reasoning a practical one. Practical reasoning is one in which there is an “ability to weigh the consequences of one’s actions.”³⁶² It differs from ethical judgment in the abstract because its benchmark in assessing a decision is not by relying on

³⁶² Brown, “The ‘Practice Turn’, *Phronesis* and Classical Realism,” 453.

a system of universal values. Political ethics invites the judging of “action by its political consequences.”³⁶³

Therefore, in any social context no longer reliant on the stability of the status quo, the sorting out of means and ends, of what is to be done and why, is *internal* to the social process and practical reasoning itself. Yoking is the mechanism that accounts for the social logic of this process. It implies that boundaries change as parts do by virtue of being in a bigger entity. But boundaries do not start as boundaries of anything. They are the outcome of random differentiations made by social actors, the products of saying and acting in a way that defines, however implicitly, the inside and outside of social phenomena.³⁶⁴ Once a “single axis of difference”³⁶⁵ crystallizes, however, boundaries are yoked together, turning into boundaries *of* something. Though subject to change because they are drawn and redrawn, these boundaries acquire a character of social thingness if they are reproduced and rationalized consistently. Importantly, it is not the *thing itself* that produces its boundaries. It is the boundaries themselves that social actors arrange through yoking *as if they belong* to a particular social thing.

Yoking helps populate the social space by well-defined entities. In such a setting, the only way to “radically change arrangements [...] is to delegitimize old differences and to emphasize new ones.”³⁶⁶ The undoing of previously yoked boundaries is a key move towards inaugurating a new social entity. As preexisting differences are on the verge of collapse, a new entity is being scripted into social existence. Efforts to do so consist, primarily, of “rationalizing these various connections so that the resulting entity has the ability to endure, as a persistent thing, in the various ecologies

³⁶³ Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 12.

³⁶⁴ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 867.

³⁶⁵ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 867.

³⁶⁶ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 872.

it is located.”³⁶⁷ A socially legitimate and legible portrait is thereby being painted of the emerging entity.

In diplomacy, yoking can be used to examine the identity claims between self and other as akin to boundaries. Because diplomatic normalization is a kind of change in the direction of diplomatic dialogue, and because this process is triggered once old boundaries are redrawn, change must be so conceptualized that a new quality of the relationship is *imagined as worthy of mediation*. This quality is socially tangible, it is argued, once self and other articulate a degree of *transitoriness between who and what they are to each other* in their relationship. Diplomatic normalization ensues, then, if the two parties are willing and able to act on the understanding that they have *something in common*.

³⁶⁷ Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” 872.

4.4.3. Stage 3 – Enactment

Enactment tends to mark the historical point at which diplomatic normalization is complete. It refers to the final stage of a lengthy process, the destination to which mutually estranged actors arrive after having recognized their need for diplomacy. In official discourse, normalization tends to be interpreted as consummation. It is symbolized most powerfully by the mutual extension of diplomatic recognition. In the case of US-China rapprochement, the date of this faithful gesture is 1 January 1979, the day on which the US shifted recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China.³⁶⁸

In this dissertation, enactment is used with a different meaning. Instead of concluding the process of normalization, enactment is its very beginning. That is, normalization *per se* begins once social actors *start practically enacting* an understanding that their relationship is worthy of diplomatic mediation. To normalize relations is, in short, *to tend towards the other in socially visible ways informed by the need for dialogue*. Used in a transitive sense, it refers to attempts by which a diplomatic understanding is *being normalized* between self and other. Enactment is the social-practical evidence that normalization is under way. It occurs when conceptualization of diplomatic change is sufficiently robust that diplomatic professionals begin to *embody it* in their social behavior.

The stage of enactment is key in cementing the relational commitment of this dissertation. The need for diplomacy can be conceived by one party *imagining the other in terms compatible* with diplomatic mediation, but enactment is a joint endeavor. This means that conceptualization is limited to fulfilling the function of an *agentic impetus*. It informs a rudimentary interest in

³⁶⁸ Jimmy Carter, "Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 11, no. 2 (1979): 227–29.

diplomatic dialogue prior to substantive exchanges. A new relationship different from its previous quality cannot, however, be produced unilaterally. It is not the outcome of a sovereign decision that proclaims a new interpretation to hold over the bilateral social field. Rather, it is generated in the back-and-forth of interactions between self and other.

This understanding of enactment carries a number of important implications. To begin with, the first stage, that of conceptualization, is likely to produce no more than a hypothesis of a *possible state of affairs between self and other*. This hypothesis is to be tested in subsequent diplomatic encounters. To be sure, that self and other *agree to meet* is testimony that an embryonic interest in diplomacy is recognized by both parties. There is no telling, however, of the *specific reasons* each of them has for doing so before the start of bilateral engagements. In the absence of prior knowledge, the two parties rely on what *they think* they can expect from each other. This means that there is likely to be a confrontation of *potentially mutually exclusive interpretations*. It is in them that surprises and tensions are generated as the actual substance of the diplomatic encounter.

Second, previous chapters may have created an impression that the stage of conceptualization is *already* an intersubjective process, and that its outcome reflects a consensus between self and other. This is misleading for at least two reasons. First, the notion that the respective interests and motivations of the two sides are *already aligned* is counterintuitive. Because of the absence of prior diplomatic intercourse, self and other are working their way out of a communicative vacuum. The turn to diplomatic dialogue is, therefore, likely to reflect the most minimal of agreements in social life: *to talk about disagreements*. Second, taking for granted that enactment is fully in sync with the conceptualization of diplomatic change is to adopt a *narrative teleology*. It works by assuming a neat correspondence between diplomatic encounters and the very conceptualization that triggered them. Such an imposition is needless as well as counterproductive. To claim that

each and every interaction during enactment was *predisposed* to serve normalization is to *restrain in advance* the openness and potentially directionless character of mutually estranged actors doing things together in diplomacy. The two parties have their respective *preconceptions* of why they decide to come to the negotiating table, but it is during the diplomatic encounter that they conceptualize what, if anything, they have in common to keep the conversation going.

This means that enactment is likely to be productive of *dissonances* between parties having agreed to meet all the while disagreeing on most everything else in their relationship. Each side behaves in line with its own preconceptions and hypotheses to the other. They act upon what they *think* the social field is about even as they scrutinize whether such behavior is competently responded to by the other party. Such engagements are highly tentative, operating in the slimmest of social contexts revolving around the need to *set a precedent*. Ties between the US and China in the late 1960s and early 1970s were, in this regard, an eminent example. Though having prepared a normative map to fill in what they do not know about the other, the two sides were, in essence, travelling without a map when they encounter one another. To claim anything more substantive than this will have to wait until the analysis of pioneering encounters between American and Chinese diplomats.

4.5. *Caveats and qualifications*

The analytical framework is employed with the following qualifications. First, the isolation of the three stages is for the purpose of analytical convenience. Estrangement and conceptualization are ontologically meaningless if they are taken separately. Estrangement is the condition in which thinking about alternatives is perceived to be necessary and possible, thereby providing the social setting for conceptualization. Yet, registering the insufficiency of the status quo takes *temporal precedence* over articulating a different structuring of it. This implies that the two phases can reasonably be approached as separate, though not independent, from one another. In fact, the empirical discussion will provide ample evidence that estrangement and conceptualization as actually experienced in social practice are two sides of the same coin. Less controversial is the separation between estrangement and conceptualization, on the one hand, and enactment, on the other. The process of diplomatic normalization introduced in this thesis assumes that diplomatic change comes about once social actors act on the particular conceptualization produced through the first two stages. The introduction of the third stage reflects, therefore, the relational premise of this dissertation. It indicates that diplomatic normalization is to be achieved between self and other acting on behalf of separate political communities. Normalization is not reducible to the conceptualization of diplomatic change by either of the two parties.

Second, the way in which the process of diplomatic normalization is hypothesized above has to do with the conceptual survey conducted in chapters 2, 3, and 4. It is informed by a theoretical puzzle, but this puzzle is structured more by the imperatives of the literatures speaking about it than by the *precise requirements* of the empirical focus in this thesis. There is thus likely to be a distance between framework and the empirical phenomena it is supposed to help investigate. What this means is that the process of diplomatic normalization is not meant as a *theory*, and the relationship

between its stages is not carved into stone. Rather, it works as a framework of concepts sharing a common *sociological sensitivity*. The case for such sensitivity has been made in previous chapters, whereby diplomacy and its necessity came to be understood as a social-practical matter. Together, the concepts informed by such sensitivity – identity, self and other, difference, relationality, practice, reflexivity, yoking – express an abstract grammar of diplomatic normalization.³⁶⁹ Its purpose is to assist in making intelligible *an actual* grammar of normalization, which denotes the “range of possible expressions relating to a practice” in a particular context.³⁷⁰ In doing so, the framework is not meant to prejudice the norms, ideas, and practices social actors register and experience as making up the substance of diplomatic normalization. Neither is it supposed to manipulate in advance the nature of the particular games being played by social actors. The rules governing those games are intersubjectively established, within the interactions taking place in the social context.³⁷¹ There is, therefore, an imperative to render the framework permissive rather than restrictive of that which can be brought into its perspective. It is also for this reason that the framework implies no more than a minimalist definition of diplomatic normalization. In this view, *it is a specific kind of change pulling in the direction of diplomatic dialogue, and which comes about through the conditions of its emergence: possibility and necessity*. Ultimately, it is for social actors to negotiate the norms, ideas, and practices conducive for diplomatic relations to be established.

³⁶⁹ Karin M. Fierke, “Links Across the Abyss: Language and Logic in International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (September 2002): 331–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2478.00236>.

³⁷⁰ Fierke, 345.

³⁷¹ Karin M. Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies: Critical Investigations in Security*, New Approaches to Conflict Analysis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter argued that the experience of strangeness is the condition of reflexivity, the missing piece in discussions structured by the question of change in and through social practices. Reflexivity is the ability to register the insufficiency of aspects of a social order, to make strange that which is taken to be familiar by most people. This ability is at disposal once social distance is realized from the norms and conventions members of a social group draw on unthinkingly. Having explored the stranger as the host of such reflexivity, the discussion continued by recasting diplomats as strangers. They habitually estrange not just from their counterparts representing a different community and enacting a lifeworld of their own, but from the very societies sending them on their diplomatic mission. The social distance resulting of this double estrangement is conducive for the inauguration of diplomatic dialogue, but it cannot guarantee that self and other keep coming back to the negotiating table. Dialogue is sustained, it was argued, if distance is counteracted by proximity. This is possible if self and other articulate a common objective that helps realize similarity in addition to difference, making each side interested in prolonging the conversation. Thus reframed, the diplomatic encounter acquires a dialectical logic, whereby participants are engaged in continuously estranging their similarities as well as their differences, cognizant that the purpose of doing so is to sustain dialogue. If there is any essence to the diplomatic encounter, it is to navigate as competently as possible between the extremes of radical strangeness and *difference-denying* identity.

Strangeness concluded the conceptual overview, preparing the way for introducing the framework of diplomatic normalization. The genesis of this process is the context of strangeness. It allows social actors to experience distantiation from the practices and norms informing their community's way of life. Relying on this social distance, they engage in thinking about alternatives. For

diplomatic normalization to be conceivable, these efforts need to converge around a different moral purpose of the relationship, one that points in the direction of diplomatic dialogue. Once this re-conceptualization is done, self and other are driven to the negotiating table. They do so in a slim social context deserted by old differences and not yet populated with new ones. What ensues is the meeting, as it were, of hypothesis with social reality. Conceptualizations specific to the two parties are confronted with the social behaviors each of them enacts in line with their respective understandings. The challenge of the diplomatic encounter is to stabilize the correspondence of meanings and practices, with an eye on keeping the conversation going.

Part II.
US-China Rapprochement as a Case of Diplomatic
Normalization

5. US-China Rapprochement and the Insufficiency of the Strategic Canon

5.1. Introduction

The historical period covering US-China rapprochement has drawn the interest of scholars and diplomatic practitioners alike. Studies accumulated since the early 1970s are vast in quantitative terms, creating the impression that the subject matter is exhausted. For at least two reasons, this literature is worthy of the *canon* label if understood as consisting of “selective memories of traditions or ideals.”³⁷² First, there is a convergence between explanations produced by academics and those written by practitioners. This confluence is due to the deference the first group of people show to the recollections produced by the second group of people. An atmosphere of respectability surrounds orthodox explanations, deterring challengers from offering alternative accounts. This awe is most detectable around the legacy of Henry Kissinger and his narrative of US-China rapprochement. Alternating between historian and statesman, Kissinger enjoyed a unique position to steer rapprochement towards the PRC, all the while setting the stage for subsequent discussions with his *insider* perspective. By doing so, Kissinger defined the terms of debates revolving around the very historical process of which he had been a protagonist. This intermingling is consequential for the state of affairs dominating the literature. With Kissinger’s work acting as a centripetal force, there is a narrowing down of who is seen as a competent commentator and what kind of analysis is treated seriously by the mainstream. Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions,³⁷³ this phenomenon and its implications have not been sufficiently problematized and brought to the surface before.

³⁷² Charles Altieri, “An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon,” *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (September 1983): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448236>.

³⁷³ William Burr and Jeremy Suri, for instance, problematize the accuracy and honesty of Kissinger’s recollections by juxtaposing them with official materials and documents that had been made accessible since the 1970s. Evelyn Goh, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Yukinori Komine likewise emphasize in their respective analyses the ways in which Kissinger sometimes distorts the picture of rapprochement.

The second reason this literature constitutes a canon is due to most studies converging in understanding rapprochement according to a *balance-of-power* logic. Informed by the question of *why* it happened rather than *how* it came to be,³⁷⁴ these explanations agree that the primary driver of normalization was the need for balancing against the Soviet Union. In so doing, these studies seek to explain this historical period, rather than understand it, by identifying a number of variables informing the two sides' interest in improving bilateral ties.³⁷⁵ Though implicit, the positivism typical of these perspectives frames Sino-US normalization as a dependent variable caused by a set of independent variables, and the role of the analyst is to discover the correct combination of factors most likely to have led to rapprochement. By way of conclusion, these investigations single out a stimulus, both internal and external, that is claimed to have pushed the two countries into each other's embrace. Besides stressing the influence of realpolitik as *definitive*, the literature also exhibits, then, the corresponding methodological uniformity, with non-positivist analyses positioned firmly at the periphery. Khoo's characterization of Evelyn Goh's discursive account as *realism in disguise*, rather than a different but not illegitimate explanation of rapprochement, is sufficient evidence to this power asymmetry.³⁷⁶

This chapter sets out to review the mainstream literature on US-China rapprochement. The purpose of doing so is threefold. First, it is to demonstrate that this literature canonizes the notion that rapprochement happened due to a *strategic entente* between China and the US. That is,

³⁷⁴ In Doty's seminal study, why-questions are perforce secondary to how-questions because "[p]ossibilities are not explained by the prior existence of structures and social actors, but rather by the continual and simultaneous production of subjects and structures." In other words, why-questions assume the *a priori* existence of various factors that are subject of critical inquiry whenever how-questions are posed. Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction," 305.

³⁷⁵ An insightful exposé of the difference between these two research motivations is still to be found in Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1–16.

³⁷⁶ Nicholas Khoo, "Realism Redux: Investigating the Causes and Effects of US-China rapprochement," *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (November 2005): 529–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740500320517>.

contributions agree that geopolitics was the fundamental driver of normalization, and that the objective of rapprochement was preconceived by both sides. In doing so, the literature is expressed in a conceptual language framing China's behavior as congruent with *theoretical expectations*. A key evidence in this regard is the frequent reference to the balance of power, specifically to the idea that the aggravation of the Soviet threat in the late 1960s is what pushed Beijing into Washington's embrace.

The second objective is to draw out problems having to do with the consistency and accuracy of the strategic canon. These issues are generated, it is argued, by virtue of the implicit structuralism of the literature, in particular the notion that the Soviet threat is singlehandedly responsible for inducing change in China's behavior. Building on this problematization, the third objective confirms that the objective-scientific credentials of the strategic canon are insufficient. To further demonstrate this insufficiency, China's ping-pong diplomacy is subjected to a critical review. In opposition to the insistence of the strategic canon, this discussion shows that China's compliance with rapprochement was not, in fact, *strategically premeditated*.

Having illustrated the poverty of the strategic canon, the chapter concludes by arguing that many of the problems ailing this literature stem from a mistaken understanding that the strategic rationale is the kernel of a *theoretical account* rather than simply of a *social narrative*. This distinction is key because a social narrative can be practically meaningful while being theoretically meaningless. To make this shift, an awareness of yoking is helpful. It assists in *undoing* some of the narrative fixes with which meaning is codified by the literature. In subsequent chapters, the purpose is to demonstrate that the idea of a *strategic China* is indeed no more than a nascent rationale imagined in American strategic discourse *about* China. It is this rationale that accounts for a new moral purpose according to which diplomatic dialogue becomes reasonable and, therefore, desirable.

5.2. Geopolitical sources of China's changing behavior towards the US

Kissinger's analysis is an authoritative artefact of the mainstream canon. Kissinger is explicit that geopolitics is what informs Beijing's decision to seek improved ties with the US. His writings are peppered with the notion that China's peril "established the absolute primacy of geopolitics."³⁷⁷ It is the bedrock of his account of rapprochement, and though it appears in different forms, the idea of a vulnerable China is referenced in his contemporary analysis as well as in his recollections.³⁷⁸ In 'White House Years' published in 1979, Kissinger proclaimed that "the balance of power was the real purpose of their [China's] opening to us."³⁷⁹ Having recognized this purpose, Mao and Zhou were alleged to have accepted that differences between China and the US were "secondary to our primary mutual concern over the international equilibrium."³⁸⁰ This convergence was due to the reformism of China's leaders, willing and able as they were to put the "ideological convulsions behind them."³⁸¹ Kissinger stressed, therefore, not simply the geopolitical imperative of normalization, but the ability of Mao and Zhou to *correctly identify* that the answer to their predicament lies in an opening towards Washington.

The literature concurs that Chinese foreign policy behavior was "justifiable in balance of power terms."³⁸² The reliance on categories like balance of power is meant to capture that China's actions were sound from a theoretical perspective. It is likewise accepted that China's appreciation of balancing was proportionate with its geopolitical *insecurity*. For A. Doak Barnett, for instance, the

³⁷⁷ Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 283.

³⁷⁸ Kissinger's account of US-China rapprochement appeared in many of his books, including his *White House Years*, *On China*, and *Diplomacy*. Though the explanations he constructs of normalization change to some extent depending on the context, most of them are informed by this strategic logic.

³⁷⁹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 1066.

³⁸⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1074.

³⁸¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 830.

³⁸² Khoo, "Realism Redux," 531.

twists and turns of security concerns provide the grand logic through which US-China relations, both its past and present, can be narrated. These concerns “were the crucial determinants of both the hostile confrontation between China and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and the détente of the 1970s.”³⁸³ The issue of security is what “has had a great impact on the Chinese Communists’ outlook and behavior.”³⁸⁴ This is evidence, then, that the literature is mirroring Kissinger’s dichotomous insistence on geopolitics *as well as* responsible leadership. If security is “the main consideration behind China’s decision to improve relations with the United States,”³⁸⁵ then it takes nothing less than “two unsentimental calculators of self-interests”³⁸⁶ to *do something* about it. That is, not only was there an acute geopolitical situation to remedy, the people tasked on both sides with fixing it were up for the job.

Another point of agreement in the literature is that the alleged pragmatism of Chinese foreign policy in the late 1960s was informed by the Soviet threat specifically. In fact, the threat was taken to influence the subsequent unfolding of rapprochement, not simply its inception. John H. Holdridge, member of the National Security Council under Kissinger, saw evidence to this influence on numerous counts. Besides responding positively to America’s overture, the Chinese leaders proved willing to compromise over the text of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué. It was the first of three such documents the two sides negotiated to lay down the fundamental principles of the nascent bilateral relationship. In particular, the 1972 communiqué was crucial in addressing the thorniest of issues between Washington and Beijing, the question of Taiwan’s status. Importantly, the wording of the Taiwan formula reflected the American interest of *refusing to*

³⁸³ A. Doak Barnett, *China and the Major Powers in East Asia* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution, 1977), 227.

³⁸⁴ A. Doak Barnett, *A New U.S. Policy toward China* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1971), 29.

³⁸⁵ Jie Li, “China’s Domestic Politics and the Normalization of Sino-U.S. Relations with China, 1972-1979,” in *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations: An International History*, eds. William C Kirby, Robert S Ross, and Gong Li (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 63.

³⁸⁶ Yukinori Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy: Nixon, Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China*, 2008, 9.

specify whether the PRC or Taiwan is the *one* China. Washington merely acknowledged “that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait(s) maintain there is but one China.”³⁸⁷ This was possible, Holdridge claimed, because of Chinese flexibility, and this flexibility was a function of the Soviet threat. As much as Kissinger believed that “Peking needed us to help break out of its isolation and as a counterweight to the potentially mortal threat along its Northern border,”³⁸⁸ this same pressure led to China’s acquiescence to the less-than-optimal phrasing of the Shanghai Communiqué.³⁸⁹ In Holdridge’s summary of the compromise (emphasis added),

“[i]n these deliberations, it became evident that the Chinese badly wanted a joint communiqué that would suit the needs of both parties; they were prepared to meet us at least half way to achieve their goal. While the Soviet Union did not have a representative sitting at our conference table, *the threat to China of Soviet armed forces stationed along China’s borders made the USSR an unseen player.*”³⁹⁰

The impression that Mao and Zhou recognized “the realpolitik rationale in an opening to the United States” was, therefore, shared by most American diplomats dealing with China at the time.³⁹¹ The Soviet threat was understood as the most pressing of concerns, but it was not the only one. Beijing’s strategic thinking was also fixated on the possible resurgence of Japanese aggression in the region. Following his October 1971 visit to China, Kissinger was surprised, for instance, that

³⁸⁷ Steven E. Phillips, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2006), Document 203, 815.

³⁸⁸ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1049.

³⁸⁹ There is, indeed, a fundamental ambiguity in the specific wording of the Taiwan formula, an ambiguity that seems to work to the advantage of US interests. For a linguistic analysis of the role of this ambiguity see Bei Hu and Anthony Pym, “Constructive Ambiguity and Risk Management in Bilingual Foreign-Affairs Texts. The Case of ‘One China,’” *Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23306343.2019.1605762>.

³⁹⁰ John H. Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide: An Insider’s Account of Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*, (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 92.

³⁹¹ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 56.

Zhou Enlai did not press for a specific deadline until which US forces be withdrawn from Taiwan. In making sense of the Chinese motivation, Kissinger relied, yet again, on the trope of geopolitical exposure: “not only would they [China’s leaders] not press for a timetable, they actually preferred that some U.S. forces remain so as to keep the Japanese forces out.”³⁹² This was further evidence that the nature of China’s interest in rapprochement was geopolitical. Throughout the 1970s, changes in China’s geopolitical situation were also interpreted as correlating with the ups and downs of normalization. The fear that it “might be next” after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia pushed the Beijing government in the direction of the US.³⁹³ The necessity of opening was due to “the Soviet threat experienced by each side.”³⁹⁴ Once the severity of the threat abated, however, the “strategic basis for the [American] relationship with China evaporated.”³⁹⁵ In the mid-1970s, the reduction of the Soviet threat directly led to a slowdown in Sino-US normalization.

³⁹² Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII: 563.

³⁹³ Victor S. Kaufman, “A Response to Chaos: The United States, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, 1961-1968,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 7, no. 1/2 (1998): 92.

³⁹⁴ Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969-1989* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 15.

³⁹⁵ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 9.

5.3. *Domestic sources of China's changing behavior towards the US*

Another line of reasoning in the mainstream literature is focused on the domestic, rather than external, sources of Chinese interest in seeking rapprochement. Studies in this strand do not question the Soviet military pressure on Beijing, but add that Chinese foreign policy was also impacted by the Cultural Revolution and the domestic turmoil it generated. Two issues, in particular, are emphasized to connect China's internal affairs with its external interest in normalization. First is the ideological alienation that took place between China and the Soviet Union, and which informed the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution itself. This alienation set the stage for shifting the lens of enmity through which China viewed the US. The second is China's backward status. Coupled with the disastrous social and economic consequences of the Great Leap Forward and other misguided policies, China was in dire need, it is argued, of economic assistance. Rapprochement was a way to secure this assistance from the US rather than from the Soviet Union. Relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union were highly volatile and fraught with challenges from the very beginning.³⁹⁶ Two months after the PRC's proclamation in 1949, Mao departed to Moscow and remained until February 1950 to secure an alliance with the Soviet Union. Bent on unifying their country divided after years of civil war, the new leaders of China were drawn to the example of the Soviet Union as a source of material support and because it represented a successful political template.³⁹⁷ In this spirit, Mao proclaimed in 1949 that "the [CPSU] is our best teacher

³⁹⁶ For an overview of the relationship during the Mao years see Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Sino-Soviet Relations during the Mao Years, 1949–1969," in *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949 - Present*, eds. Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li, Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series (Lanham.: Lexington Books, 2010), 27–61.

³⁹⁷ John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

and we must learn from it.”³⁹⁸ Despite the CCP’s adherence to the Bolshevik creed, gaining Stalin’s support was not a foregone conclusion. Negative historical experiences complicated the relationship with the Soviet leaders.³⁹⁹ After the CCP was established in 1921, Stalin looked at China’s aspiring communists with disdain, unwilling to lend his assistance as long as the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek were contending for power. Such a “legacy of distrust” was difficult to overcome.⁴⁰⁰ Furthermore, Tsarist Russia was no exception in exploiting China’s weakness in the 19th century for territorial gains. The 1860 Treaty of Peking imposed upon the Celestial Court serious territorial concessions in Manchuria and North-East China, and codified a set of Tsarist prerogatives in the region.⁴⁰¹ Stalin fashioned the Soviet Union’s alliance with China upon conditions strikingly reminiscent of earlier Tsarist demands, making it seem like yet another unequal treaty was enforced onto Beijing.⁴⁰² Not only did Mao pay with concessions in Xinjiang for the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, he received in exchange material assistance whose primary component was a negligible credit of 300 US dollars over 5 years.⁴⁰³

After 1953, disagreements emerged over the correct handling of Josef Stalin’s legacy. The new Soviet leadership under Khrushchev disavowed Stalin’s personality cult. For the CCP, this was unacceptable revisionism. Subsequently, the conflict acquired a sharply ideological character. The

³⁹⁸ Quoted in Thomas P. Bernstein, “Introduction: The Complexities of Learning from the Soviet Union,” in *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present*, eds. Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li, Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), 1.

³⁹⁹ Mineo Nakajima, “Foreign Relations: From the Korean War to the Bandung Line,” in *The People’s Republic, Part 1: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1949–1965*, eds. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China* 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 262–70.

⁴⁰⁰ Bernstein, “Introduction: The Complexities of Learning from the Soviet Union,” 5.

⁴⁰¹ Neville Maxwell, “How the Sino-Russian Boundary Conflict Was Finally Settled: From Nerchinsk 1689 to Vladivostok 2005 via Zhenbao Island 1969,” *Critical Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (June 2007): 230–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710701340079>.

⁴⁰² Matthew Craven, “What Happened to Unequal Treaties? The Continuities of Informal Empire,” *Nordic Journal of International Law* 74, no. 3–4 (2005): 335–82, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157181005774939896>.

⁴⁰³ Nakajima, “Foreign Relations: From the Korean War to the Bandung Line,” 269.

two sides clashed over which country's internal practices better approximated the tenets of socialism, and by extension which had a stronger claim to lead the international communist movement.⁴⁰⁴ By the time of military skirmishes between Chinese and Soviet troops in 1969 along the disputed Zhenbao Island,⁴⁰⁵ the Sino-Soviet split was complete. The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution was in large part an effect of these cleavages. Mao interpreted the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia and the Brezhnev doctrine as "great nation chauvinism,"⁴⁰⁶ as evidence that Moscow is bent on orchestrating a Soviet-style capitalist restoration in China.⁴⁰⁷ In response, the Cultural Revolution was meant to demonstrate that China remains the last stronghold of socialist orthodoxy.

In the literature, the Cultural Revolution is claimed to have contributed to China's interest in opening towards the US in two ways. First, it confirmed that the primary foe in both ideological and military terms is the Soviet Union rather than the US. In this vein, Jian argues that "Beijing could not afford to maintain the same level of enmity against the US as before."⁴⁰⁸ Embracing the former enemy was, therefore, a way for China to counteract the immediate threat emanating from its erstwhile ally. Second, the Cultural Revolution led to large-scale societal chaos and a rupture in the leadership of the CCP, with opposition to Mao and his policies growing in the party. To retain control over domestic as well as foreign policy, Mao needed to sideline the so-called "ultra-

⁴⁰⁴ Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 8–12.

⁴⁰⁵ Lyle J. Goldstein, "Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why It Matters," *The China Quarterly* 168 (December 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443901000572>; Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 4 (December 1972): 1175–1202, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957173>.

⁴⁰⁶ R. G. Boyd, *Communist China's Foreign Policy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 73.

⁴⁰⁷ Joseph W. Esherick, "On The 'Restoration of Capitalism': Mao and Marxist Theory," *Modern China* 5, no. 1 (January 1979): 41–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770047900500102>.

⁴⁰⁸ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, The New Cold War History (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 239.

leftists,”⁴⁰⁹ such as the notorious Gang of Four. Lin Biao, once Mao’s heir-designate and Minister of National Defense, is alleged to have intended to topple Mao and seize power for himself.⁴¹⁰ Chinese sources do not seem to confirm that Lin or others ever seriously objected to the general policies designated by Mao.⁴¹¹ Yet, the turn towards the US was hardly *uncontroversial*. Pressing forward with such policies always bore the personal political signature of Mao himself. Li Jie argues in such a vein, claiming that Mao kept to the line of improving ties with the United States despite the ultra-leftists’ efforts to slow the process down.⁴¹² Defying common sense by seeking closer ties with the US was, therefore, a way for him to demonstrate that he remains at the helm of political power in China.

Another domestic source of China’s foreign policy behavior is alleged to be its backward status. Specifically, it is argued that American policy planners assumed that the PRC is in desperate need of tangible support and resources.⁴¹³ This was particularly evident following the disastrous consequences of the 1958 Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.⁴¹⁴ Goh traces the emergence of a specific trajectory in US political discourse around the image of China as the ‘Troubled Modernizer,’ an underdeveloped country whose economic hardships were expected to

⁴⁰⁹ Ya feng Xia, “China’s Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969-February 1972,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 4 (2006): 12.

⁴¹⁰ Lin Biao died after his plane crashed in Mongolia in September 1971. The exact circumstances of his death are still unclear. For more see Stephen Uhalley and Jin Qiu, “The Lin Biao Incident: More Than Twenty Years Later,” *Pacific Affairs* 66, no. 3 (1993): 386, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2759617>.

⁴¹¹ Xia, “China’s Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969-February 1972.”

⁴¹² Li, “China’s Domestic Politics and the Normalization of Sino-U.S. Relations with China, 1972-1979,” 56–90.

⁴¹³ 1966 proved to be a good year for both agricultural and industrial output, indicating that the economy is recovering from the slowdown caused by the Great Leap Forward and subsequent natural calamities. Perkins suggests that Mao launched the Cultural Revolution having witnessed that the economy is by and large back on track. The effect of the subsequent upheaval generated by the Cultural Revolution was thus less in economic output *per se* as in disruptions of management and decision-making processes among economic actors. Dwight H. Perkins, “Economic Growth in China and the Cultural Revolution (1960-April 1967),” *The China Quarterly*, no. 30 (1967): 33–48.

⁴¹⁴ A brief overview of the effects of these policies is provided in Alan Lawrance, *China under Communism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 55–82.

be solvable with “Western socioeconomic liberalism.”⁴¹⁵ American China policy was not exclusively shaped according to this image, but its impact was palpable in increasing the conceivability of rapprochement with China. The image implied not just that China is not unique in its problems, but also that the country can be nudged with the right combination of external measures to approximate “America’s own image.”⁴¹⁶

There is evidence that American policy-makers acted on this understanding. It was implicit, for instance, in National Security Study Memorandum 35. Commissioned by Kissinger in March 1969 on the subject of US trade policy towards communist countries, the study explored the easing of trade restrictions and their implications for the receptibility of US diplomatic overtures by the PRC.⁴¹⁷ Following NSSM 35, a partial relaxation of the trade embargo occurred in July 1969.⁴¹⁸ Similar gestures of a unilateral character were not uncommon. American administrations experimented with them to try and gauge Beijing’s response and potential interest in a thaw.⁴¹⁹ Doing so reflected the conviction that China’s backward status can be leveraged in the service of rapprochement. If enticed with increasing trade possibilities and material goods, Beijing was expected to respond positively to Washington’s diplomatic opening. That is, the domestic economic situation served as a pressure point to be manipulated from the outside. In expecting prompt response to external stimuli, the US relied on the notion that China’s current situation is

⁴¹⁵ Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974*, 51.

⁴¹⁶ Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974*, 61.

⁴¹⁷ National Security Study Memorandum 35, National Security Council, March 28, 1969. Available at https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nssm-nixon/nssm_035.pdf.

⁴¹⁸ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 88.

⁴¹⁹ Kochavi details, for instance, the Kennedy administration’s material support for China. Noam Kochavi, “Kennedy, China, and the Tragedy of No Chance,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 7 (1998): 107–16.

deficient not just geopolitically but economically, too. It was up for Washington to take advantage of this less-than-ideal state of affairs in the service of normalization.

5.4. *Problematization of the mainstream literature*

Overall, the mainstream literature is focused on domestic as well as external developments to explain China's interest in rapprochement. At an acceptable cost of abstraction, the reasons enlisted can be clustered around two key claims. These are, first, an objective geopolitical threat and, second, a specific kind of leadership represented by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.⁴²⁰ The literature relies on these notions as the *sources of* Chinese conduct. It views them as two sides of the same coin, implicitly accepting that their integration in one explanation is theoretically sound. In what follows, three issues are identified and discussed. The first pertains to the confusing stance the literature exhibits on the role structure and agency play, respectively, in informing Chinese behavior. The second has to do with the alleged uniqueness of the Soviet threat and its influence in sparking China's rationality in the late 1960s. The third is the assumption that Chinese foreign policy registered a shift away from ideology towards pragmatism, with the misleading implication that the two are mutually exclusive.

First, the mainstream argument is, in effect, a structural claim about state behavior in response to external stimulus. This claim is at odds with the notion of *exceptionality* attributed to the Chinese leaders themselves. If Mao and Zhou "acted from an eminently realist-based strategic rationale,"⁴²¹ then they are accredited, first, with a commitment of looking at the hard facts of China's environment *as they are*, and, second, with a strategic sensitivity fueling a conscious calculation of means and ends in their situation. Yet, the insistence on the Soviet threat as an independent variable, along with the need for balancing it *automatically* requires, questions the relevance of all

⁴²⁰ That this abstraction is acceptable has to do with the particular prioritization according to which the sources of China's interest in rapprochement is arranged. Most importantly, the literature is centered on the primacy of the Soviet threat. This renders all other reasons *secondary by necessity*.

⁴²¹ Khoo, "Realism Redux," 544.

such deliberation by Mao and Zhou. The influence attributed to the Soviet threat frames Chinese foreign policy as akin to a billiard ball moving in a direction determined by an outside force.⁴²² This is hardly a mischaracterization. The strategic canon impresses that the Soviet threat *forced* China to embrace the United States. But if a possible invasion by Moscow suffices to trigger change in China's behavior, then the identity of its leaders is incidental, and their performance an *epiphenomenon* of structural imperatives. That is, who *exactly* occupied the helm of the Beijing government is of no explanatory value because a structural argument uninterested in the black box of the state is inhospitable to the role of individuals. Kissinger and the realist chorus argue that rapprochement is a *general* case of the balance of power exerting its influence *on its own*, even though they cannot help stress the *specificity* of it with the portrayal of Mao and Zhou. They side with structure by emphasizing the Soviet threat, but transgress to agency by insisting that the Chinese leaders *did make a difference*. In doing so, they are oblivious that these formulations are hardly productive of the consistency expected of a structural claim.

Beyond its confusing stance on the issue of structure and agency, the second problem concerns the specific timing of the inception of China's *rationality*. This charge is commonly raised against explanations that assume changes in individual state behavior are triggered as a matter of course whenever a shift occurs in the balance of power.⁴²³ "[O]rdering principles" like anarchy allow neither variation nor evolution over time in state behavior.⁴²⁴ This theoretical penchant towards constancy is not, however, reflected in the insistence that the Soviet threat is *solely* responsible for sparking China's rational appreciation of its vulnerability. Since 1949, the Beijing government

⁴²² Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 20; J. David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961): 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009557>.

⁴²³ Stefano Guzzini, "Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis," *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993): 443–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300028022>.

⁴²⁴ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2010), 93–97.

identified a plethora of military challenges, and framed them *as such* in discourse. Was the balance of power not a variable in Beijing's decision to lean on the Soviet Union and form a military alliance in early 1950?⁴²⁵ Would it have happened in the absence of what the PRC saw as Washington's obvious preference for the Nationalist regime?⁴²⁶ Did China's decision to enter the Korean War in the summer of 1950 not reflect an awareness of security concerns? The answer to the last question, in particular, seems to be most obvious (all emphases added):

“It was natural that Mao's greatest concern was the *physical security* of the newly established regime, and that he was especially worried about the possibility that the “new revolutionary regime may be strangled in its cradle.” *The most likely threat came from the United States*, the patron of [the] CCP's rival.”⁴²⁷

Already in 1946, at the time of the US Marshall Mission in China, Mao and Zhou articulated that the US motivation is to “reduce China into a US colony,” and to dominate the country alone.⁴²⁸ This is evidence that the Chinese leaders were attuned to interpreting the challenges facing China in geopolitical terms.⁴²⁹ The strategic canon insisting on the singularity of the Soviet threat and in the late 1960s is oblivious to this precedent.

⁴²⁵ Note how contemporary reports emphasized that the two sides agreed to assist each other not just “against Japanese aggression, but also against any other State that might unite with Japan directly or indirectly in any act of aggression.” See Robert C. North, “The Sino-Soviet Agreements of 1950,” *Far Eastern Survey* 19, no. 13 (July 12, 1950): 126, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3024085>.

⁴²⁶ Odd Arne Westad, “Losses, Chances, and Myths: The United States and the Creation of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1950,” *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 1 (January 1997): 105–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7709.00055>.

⁴²⁷ Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, “China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisted,” *The China Quarterly* 121 (March 1990): 103–4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000013527>.

⁴²⁸ Quoted in Shu Guang Zhang, “In the Shadow of Mao: Zhou Enlai and China's New Diplomacy,” in *The Diplomats, 1939-79*, eds. Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 343–44.

⁴²⁹ Kai He, “Dynamic Balancing: China's Balancing Strategies towards the United States, 1949–2005,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 58 (January 2009): 113–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560802431701>.

There are two ways to address the historical (in)consistency of China's behavior and the challenge it poses. One possibility is that the Soviet threat is *sui generis* in 1969. Such uniqueness cannot, however, be explored unless a historically more robust approach is taken. It requires turning away from the structural notion that Chinese behavior is unremarkable at this time, and to invest more in analyzing the contextual sources of China's agency. The other is that China's post-1949 foreign policy had been rational and strategically sound from the very beginning. The problem with this alternative is that it flies in the face of the dominant American view of China. In vogue prior to rapprochement, the US perceived the rationales underpinning the PRC's behavior as "drastically different from those that would be held by a normal, non-revolutionary regime."⁴³⁰ The two options are, then, a sudden conversion by Mao and Zhou in 1969 to a kind of realism recognizable by the US, or a decades-long misunderstanding whereby the US failed to decipher the PRC's behavior as inherently rational. Because of its confusing position on the question of structure versus agency, the mainstream literature seems ill-equipped to explore either of these two options in a consistent way.

Third, and finally, Chinese foreign policy did not simply *abandon* its ideological substance to embrace pragmatism in the late 1960s. Practitioners of "modern Machiavellianism," Mao and Zhou were usually portrayed in the run-up to rapprochement as having a sense of realism, for whom "ideological slogans were a façade for considerations of the classical European balance of power."⁴³¹ The characterization frames ideology as no more than a superficial rhetoric to which the Chinese leaders pay lip service, primarily for a domestic demonstration effect. That is, ideological discourse is implicitly subordinated to the ontological primacy of political practice.

⁴³⁰ Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 138.

⁴³¹ Ronald C. Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 3.

Such a binary between speaking and acting is, however, untenable. The CCP's ideology, writes Michael Sheng, was not a "set of rhetorical principles or doctrines which could be hung high and dry."⁴³² Instead, it was the very "spiritual matrix from which Mao and his comrades formed their visions of reality and policy guidelines."⁴³³ Kissinger stressed that Zhou Enlai managed to "discipline a passionate nature into one of the most acute and unsentimental assessments of reality."⁴³⁴ This implies that the irrationality of Zhou's passion needed to be suppressed for the sake of pragmatism. The personal realism of Zhou was, however, an "ideological construct."⁴³⁵ It encompassed a concern with both revolutionary principle (ideology) as well as political power (realism), which reflected an underlying logic of Marxist dialectics. In insisting on the awe-inspiring realism of the Chinese leaders, Kissinger takes for granted that this realism was *uncontaminated* by the worldview specific to China at the time. Likewise, in presenting himself as "worldly-wise" to his interlocutors, Mao did not simply reveal his true essence as a political actor. Disguised in this impression was, rather, a fundamental commitment to ideology that *filtered* whatever entered his strategic calculus.⁴³⁶ This is another example, then, of the reductionism of the literature. By arguing that ideology is no more than background noise to the harmony of geopolitics between leaders committed to the same realism, the canon makes it seem like there is a trivial dissociation between ideological considerations and those *allegedly free of ideology*.⁴³⁷

To be sure, Kissinger is not unaware that the Chinese turnaround at the end of the 1960s is *odd*, and not just in comparison with the perception American policy-makers had of China for years. It

⁴³² Michael M. Sheng, *Battling Western Imperialism: Mao, Stalin, and the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 192.

⁴³³ Sheng, 192.

⁴³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 50.

⁴³⁵ Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 214.

⁴³⁶ Lucian W. Pye and Chen Jian, "Mao's China and the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2001): 175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20050309>.

⁴³⁷ Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy*, 4.

comes off as strange when judged against Chinese historical experience. Writing in 1973 that China had throughout its history “no direct experience of the notions of balance of power or sovereign equality,” Kissinger concluded that it is “all the more remarkable how adept it became at it when the outside world gave no choice.”⁴³⁸ But this is only a rearticulation of the very problem, not a solution to it. If the external environment left *no choice* for the Chinese leaders, then their response to this stimulus is *anything but remarkable*. Kissinger means this statement as an explanation, but it is a paradox expressing a puzzle. There is no attempt in the literature to try and address it.

⁴³⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 68.

5.5. *China's rational turn that never happened*

So far, the discussion focused on the structuralism of the mainstream literature and a number of problems generated by such a commitment. This analysis demonstrated that the canon is not above reproach in terms of consistency. By stressing that the Soviet threat is what accounts for change in China's behavior, the literature runs into questions it is ill-equipped to answer. Having dealt with the *structural* claims, it is time to look at those emphasizing China's *agency*. This section focuses on the notion that Chinese foreign policy had objectively changed by way of a *rational turn*. That is, even if the literature is inaccurate in its scientific assessment, it remains to be investigated why the American diplomats attributed a sense of realism to the Chinese leaders. Their writings give away a conviction that China's behavior was *inherently* rational at the time of rapprochement, which implies that Washington's deciphering it as being informed by balance-of-power principles was of secondary importance. As Nixon said during a press conference in January 1969, the "onus of change" is on China.⁴³⁹ American observers claimed that this change had reassuringly occurred in China's behavior in the run-up to rapprochement. In particular, China's ping-pong diplomacy in 1971 is emphasized as tangible evidence to this transformation. American diplomats viewed it not only as confirmation that China is rational, but that its positive response to America's overture is *strategically premeditated*. In what follows, this interpretation is challenged.

Until the late 1960s, US China policy mostly followed a wait-and-see approach. Containment was the only game in town because any shift away from it was explicitly tied to a thorough transformation of China's foreign policy. As long as Beijing kept to its revolutionary aspirations internationally, a more conciliatory approach by Washington was seen as rewarding China for bad

⁴³⁹ Quoted in Jean Garrison, "Constructing the 'National Interest' in U.S.? China Policy Making: How Foreign Policy Decision Groups Define and Signal Policy Choices," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 2 (April 2007): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2007.00043.x>.

behavior. Even in 1969, the status quo in bilateral affairs was attributed to China's intransigence, with Nixon proclaiming that "until some changes occur on their side I see no immediate prospect of any change in our policy."⁴⁴⁰ A direct link was thus established between the possibility of rapprochement and the kind of foreign policy pursued by Beijing. It was China that needed to change in a way positively sanctioned by the United States.

Informing the policy of containment was a consistent articulation by American observers of the fundamental strangeness of the PRC's behavior. Stressing its ideological nature, this discourse created an impression of incomprehensible difference. The Ward incident of November 1949, weeks after the proclamation of the PRC, set the basic tone of Sino-American confrontation.⁴⁴¹ For Washington, the detention and harsh treatment of Angus Ward and his staff demonstrated that "the Chinese Communists were illiterate in the language of international diplomacy and decency."⁴⁴² Subsequent conflicts confirmed this basic frame. During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, President Eisenhower remarked that the "Red Chinese appear to be completely reckless, arrogant, possibly over-confident, and completely indifferent as to human losses."⁴⁴³ According to Kissinger, this picture lost nothing of its prevalence even in August 1969, at a time when the Pakistani channel was busy relaying messages between Washington and Beijing. Though Pakistani President Yahya Khan tried to impress that the Chinese are pragmatic and potentially reliable, this was incompatible

⁴⁴⁰ Quoted in Garrison, "Constructing the 'National Interest' in U.S.?" 111.

⁴⁴¹ Chen Jian, "The Ward Case and the Emergence of Sino-American Confrontation, 1948-1950," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 30 (July 1993): 149-70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2949995>.

⁴⁴² Jian, "The Ward Case," 166.

⁴⁴³ Quoted in Gordon Chang and He Di, "The Absence of War in the U.S.-China Confrontation over Quemoy and Matsu in 1954-1955: Contingency, Luck, Deterrence?," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (December 1993): 1514, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/98.5.1500>.

with the dominant American perception of the Chinese leaders as “almost irrationally fanatic ideologues.”⁴⁴⁴

In large part, it was China’s ping-pong diplomacy that successfully challenged this framework of irrationality. Ping-pong diplomacy started, in the eyes of American observers, with the Chinese team’s participation at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan, and concluded with the visit of the American team to China. The exchanges at the tournament and in China were seen as leading to a mutual understanding of friendship.⁴⁴⁵ The American picture of ping-pong diplomacy was one of rationally calculated and meticulously planned, albeit pragmatic, steps taken by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. A sport of foreign origin domesticated over time and employed as a “subtle instrument of foreign policy,”⁴⁴⁶ table tennis and the Chinese players’ mastery of it was connected to a purpose that is both political and intentional. The Beijing government was seen as sending a signal. The broadcasting of this signal was assumed to be methodical, and its authorship attributed to Zhou Enlai. As John H. Holdridge reconstructs,

“[It] was an inspired and theatrical piece of *diplomacy* that had all the attributes of Zhou Enlai’s sophistication, wisdom, and sense of tactical and strategic planning.”⁴⁴⁷

The timing of the tournament played a key role in narrowing down the purpose of ping-pong diplomacy. By the spring of 1971, Washington had already taken tangible steps of overture towards the PRC, and American diplomats believed that Mao and Zhou took for granted, *as much*

⁴⁴⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 181.

⁴⁴⁵ Hiroaki Sakakibara, “Ping-Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History behind the Game That Changed the World,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 2 (January 22, 2015): 405–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2014.990188>.

⁴⁴⁶ Nicholas Griffin, *Ping-pong Diplomacy: The Secret History behind the Game That Changed the World*, (New York: Scribner, 2014), 2.

⁴⁴⁷ Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide*, 48.

as them, that rapprochement would inevitably come to fruition sooner rather than later. Therefore, they were under the impression that Zhou orchestrated ping-pong diplomacy with the objective of overshadowing their own labor in realizing the Sino-American diplomatic breakthrough. Holdridge wrote about this alleged clash over the *ownership* of rapprochement thus (emphases added):

“Zhou *must have foreseen* the dramatic nature and consequences of world politics of a visit to China by a senior U.S. representative such as Kissinger, *which was almost certain to take place later that year*, and rather than allow the United States to claim the credit for a diplomatic breakthrough, he took steps to see that China, not the United States, would be regarded as the initiator of improved relations.”⁴⁴⁸

Holdridge continued by claiming that the National Security Council was a bit upset by “being upstaged by Zhou Enlai,” but credit was due to the Chinese Premier for “his perspicacity in jumping ahead of us [Americans] in the matter of improving U.S.-China contacts.”⁴⁴⁹ Not only was ping-pong diplomacy a coherent and intentional set of moves, its rationality was seen in purposefully greasing the wheels of diplomacy towards rapprochement, and to take credit for what the American diplomats deemed to be their success.

There is little evidence to support Zhou’s much-vaunted perspicacity. Studies that revisited and broke down the cumbersome chain of events associated with ping-pong diplomacy are quite convincing in their findings. They make untenable the American impression that ping-pong diplomacy operated according to a premeditated strategic purpose, with China’s masterminds pulling the strings from behind and planning events in anticipation of what is to come. Ping-pong

⁴⁴⁸ Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide*, 48.

⁴⁴⁹ Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide*, 48.

diplomacy was nothing more than the result of happenstance. Hong and Sun captured its incidental character by reference to the so-called “butterfly effect.”⁴⁵⁰ Emphasizing that the causes of major change are complex and cannot be reduced to a “few ‘laws’ and historical inevitabilities,”⁴⁵¹ they demonstrated that ping-pong diplomacy boiled down to a series of coincidences, none of which could have been foreseen or planned by the Chinese leadership.

It is doubtless that a key development reached at the tournament was the invitation of the American team to China. This invitation, however, was the outcome of an interplay of initially unconnected events, rather than a decision reflecting the strategic foresight of the Beijing government. Hong and Sun stress the absence of a “previous plan or expectation for a breakthrough in US-China relations within the [Chinese] decision-making circle before the Chinese team left for Japan.” Mao’s remarks prior to the tournament impressed an atmosphere of seriousness but uncertainty: “the players have to be prepared for not only hardships but also death. We should be prepared to lose a few people; of course it will be better if we do not.”⁴⁵² At the start, Mao even opposed sending the Chinese team to Nagoya. It was Zhou that insisted doing so. Once the tournament was under way, however, Zhou argued against extending an invitation to the American team.⁴⁵³ The American side signaled multiple times its willingness to travel to China, but the response from Beijing was that “it is not yet time to invite them.”⁴⁵⁴ On 4 April, a seemingly minor incident happened, with an American player, Glenn Cowan, mistakenly boarding the van carrying the Chinese team. Zhuang Zedong, a Chinese player, started conversing with him, and the two

⁴⁵⁰ Zhaohui Hong and Yi Sun, “The Butterfly Effect and the Making of ‘Ping-Pong Diplomacy,’” *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 25 (November 2000): 429–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713675951>.

⁴⁵¹ Hong and Sun, “The Butterfly Effect,” 430.

⁴⁵² Hong and Sun, “The Butterfly Effect,” 433.

⁴⁵³ Zhisui Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao’s Personal Physician* (New York: Random House, 2011), 630.

⁴⁵⁴ Hong and Sun, “The Butterfly Effect,” 435.

exchanged t-shirts. Zhou reported the incident to Mao on 6 April, suggesting that a possible visit by the American team *still* be politely rejected. Zhisui Li, Mao's personal nurse, has the rest of the story as follows:

“Mao received Zhou's report on April 6, 1971, agreed with it, and returned it to Zhou. But at midnight of that same day, as Mao was finishing his dinner, and I had given him his sedatives, he asked head nurse Wu Xujun, in drowsy, slurred *speech*, to call Wang Hairong, chief of protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He wanted to invite the American team to China right away. Mao was on the point of falling asleep when Wu repeated Mao's words to him, to confirm that she had the message right. Mao nodded and fell sound asleep.”⁴⁵⁵

Mao said of Zhuang Zedong that he “is not only a good ping-pong player, but also a diplomat. He is quite politically sensitive.”⁴⁵⁶ Indeed, Zhuang's abrupt friendliness towards Cowen was instrumental, but the significance of their meeting lay precisely in its *apolitical* nature. The two players acted as strangers whose relationship is defined by their participation in a sports tournament, not by the antagonism evident in US-China relations. While on the van, Zhuang articulated this much in his response to Zhao Zhenghong, head of the Chinese delegation. Zhao told Zhuang to “stop his impulsive action,” to which Zhuang replied (emphasis added): “[T]ake it easy. I am just a player. *It does not matter.*”⁴⁵⁷ This escape into insignificance is what rendered the incident profoundly diplomatic. It allowed the moment to be scripted not in the familiar template of hostility, but in the template of *nothing in particular*. Later on, the American players visiting China were also deemed “unlikely diplomats.” They brought home the “message that China is a

⁴⁵⁵ Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, 558.

⁴⁵⁶ Quoted in Hong and Sun, “The Butterfly Effect,” 437.

⁴⁵⁷ Hong and Sun, “The Butterfly Effect,” 436.

united, rational society trying to open the doors to other parts of the world.”⁴⁵⁸ This view was in stark contrast with the perception held for decades by the American public. Over time, old notions about China were steadily upended, and the cumbersome chain of events came to be associated with ping-pong diplomacy.

Indeed, it is telling that the American diplomats and the literature relying on their narratives recognize the rationality of China in the very historical moment its behavior *becomes compatible* with an American interest in rapprochement. This coincidence is highly suspect. It seems to result from a particular normative inclination towards making sense of China, an attitude informed by what Kavalski calls the ‘Columbus syndrome.’⁴⁵⁹ The expression denotes a predicament plaguing contemporary discussions of a rising China, but it is applicable to the case of rapprochement, too. Columbus had a particular preconception. It consisted in assuming that making sense of the New World is fundamentally an issue of *recognition*, or identification. He believed that the new things he had encountered along his journey were knowable, and hence not genuinely new, if only he had read “the writings of men who did know them.”⁴⁶⁰ Expecting that the templates of the past are applicable in each case and that there is a natural name to everything, Columbus also assumed that “linguistic diversity does not exist.”⁴⁶¹ Columbus’ bias revealed itself most instructively in his confusion upon hearing the Amerindian language. As he did not understand the indigenous tongue, Columbus concluded that the Amerindians are altogether “unable to speak.”⁴⁶² The implication is

⁴⁵⁸ Mayumi Itoh, *The Origin of Ping-pong Diplomacy: The Forgotten Architect of Sino-U.S. Rapprochement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 134.

⁴⁵⁹ Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory*, 1–15.

⁴⁶⁰ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women Who Shaped Early America*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2009), 4.

⁴⁶¹ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 29.

⁴⁶² Chengxin Pan and Emilian Kavalski, “Theorizing China’s Rise in and beyond International Relations,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcy018>.

drawn out by Todorov:⁴⁶³ either foreign people speak the same language as Europeans do, or what they speak is not a language at all. What was inconceivable for Columbus was to consider what he heard as a phenomenon that is *both foreign and a language* at the same time.⁴⁶⁴

The metaphor helps illuminate Washington's blindness to the possible rationality of the PRC's foreign policy after 1949. Much like Columbus' faith in the universality and exclusivity of European languages, American statesmen held firm in their conviction that there can only be "a single course of action to which states are unerringly guided by consultation of their national interest."⁴⁶⁵ The designation 'revolutionary,' the category to which Chinese foreign policy was relegated in US discourse for two decades after 1949, was employed as a euphemism that stood for *inscrutably* irrational. It was informed by the idea that Beijing has yet to discover the gold standard of normal state behavior. It also relieved the US of any responsibility in expanding dialogue beyond the narrow confines of the Ambassadorial Talks in Warsaw, a channel active between 1955 and 1970 but without much to show in negotiating outcomes.⁴⁶⁶ During this period, it was impossible to discover the normalcy of Chinese behavior because of its opposition to the American national interest. US perceptions amply conveyed this impression. In Isaacson's summary, "the U.S. public and its professional policy elite had viewed China as a fanatic,

⁴⁶³ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 30.

⁴⁶⁴ Pan and Kavalski discuss how Columbus' myopic perspective is detectable in much contemporary IR scholarship: "The implication here is that IR's knowledge-production suffers from a similar condition to that of Columbus. That is, when it encounters 'other' concepts, practices, and experience of the 'international', IR more often than not reverts to the prism of its Columbus syndrome: either it recognizes them as narratives about world politics but does not acknowledge that they are different; or acknowledges that they are different, but refuses to admit that they are part of IR (thereby relegating them to fields such as cultural studies, area studies, and anthropology)." Pan and Kavalski, "Theorizing China's Rise in and beyond International Relations," 296.

⁴⁶⁵ Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy*, 4.

⁴⁶⁶ The primary value of the channel was in producing some level of mutual familiarity and the easing of tensions between Washington and Beijing, particularly during the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954-55 and 1958. According to Goldstein, however, the only notable success associated with the channel was the 1955 agreement on repatriation, and even that one was "terribly flawed" Steven M. Goldstein, "Dialogue of the Deaf?," in *Re-Examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, eds. Robert S Ross and Changbin Jiang (Cambridge: BRILL, 2002), 234.

revolutionary realm, a terra incognita of the sort that ancient cartographers used to label ‘here be dragons.’”⁴⁶⁷ The decades-long containment policy against China operated on this very assumption. It sought to force a *reckoning* among Chinese leaders that theirs is an abnormal foreign policy, and that American statesmen would continue to shun them unless a complete turnaround occurs in their behavior. In short, China needed to change, not the United States. Until China learned the language of Kissingeresque realpolitik in the late 1960s, it spoke an indigenous tongue incomprehensible for American listeners. More precisely, *what it spoke was no language at all*.

In the eyes of American observers, ping-pong diplomacy marked the conclusion of China’s familiarization with the language of rationality. This understanding had more to do with the Americans, however, than with the Chinese. The developments subsumed under ping-pong diplomacy were not meaningful *on their own*. They were not steps belonging to a larger process conceived in the highest echelons of power in Beijing. Mao did make a conscious decision to invite the American team, even if late at night and under the influence of sleeping pills. That such a decision was part of an overarching strategy intended to facilitate normalization is, however, false. Though cognizant that a future visit by the American team will bring about change in bilateral affairs, the notion that either he or Zhou Enlai was aware of its precise consequences is profoundly mistaken. In scrutinizing this re-inscription of Chinese behavior in an overarching narrative, the discussion exposed the absence of a direct correspondence between American discourse and what it registered as the newfound rationality of Chinese behavior. Such an understanding was not, in short, descriptive. It came about, instead, through yoking. American observers drew together developments in a way such that their significance came to denote China’s metamorphosis into a normal power. The van incident and the Chinese invitation acquired meaning from this vantage

⁴⁶⁷ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013), 334.

point. They became boundaries of a nascent understanding about China, one that was no longer premised on its abnormality. This confirms, then, that rapprochement is not the story of US discourse *finding the right fit* with Chinese reality. The strategic rationale informing rapprochement is neither a theoretical explanation nor an expression of China's identity. It is a social narrative *par excellence*.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that a similar logic underpins explanations that emphasize the role of China's domestic situation, and those that insist on the geopolitical character of rapprochement. Both of them explain the success of diplomatic opening by insisting on factors that left the Chinese regime reliant, unstable and in some sense vulnerable – its agency reduced, in short, to merely registering the pressure points over whose influence it retained no control. Such circumstances are argued to have created a window of opportunity, and the US promptly stepped up in the late 1960s to take advantage of it. Once the idea of improving ties with Beijing was conceived in Washington, China's exposure – geopolitical, economical – was expected to provide the basic scaffolding upon which its interest can be secured, if not coopted and forced. In fact, "putting the Chinese in fear,"⁴⁶⁸ as Richard Nixon noted in 1971 with a view to inflating the Soviet threat, was meant to guarantee Beijing's commitment to rapprochement. Subsequently, its interest in a diplomatic thaw was taken to be evidence of China's balancing strategy and its subscription to the very same realism that informed the American approach. In other words, it was China's alleged awakening to strategic consciousness in the late 1960s that allowed for the conception of a relationship no longer based on enmity. This new understanding served to cast Beijing in the light of a *normal* power, a global actor reasonable and rational enough to come to terms with the necessity of engaging Washington. Due in part to American pressure, China shed its decades-long abnormality and began to embrace warmer ties with its erstwhile foe.

The chapter contested the influence attributed to the strategic logic in informing US-China rapprochement. It was an exercise in problematizing the sense of disturbing *obviousness* of that

⁴⁶⁸ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 163.

which is profoundly counterintuitive: an entente forged between actors not long before firmly predisposed to opposing the other's very existence. The scientific objectivity ambitioned by the strategic canon is an illusion. Not only is it internally inconsistent, it passes over key empirical questions. The literature mixes a structural approach with a *strategic cultural* approach,⁴⁶⁹ but it is unreflective of the problems such a marriage of convenience generates. This insufficiency appears to be a logical consequence of a singular focus on *outcome* rather than *process*. By prioritizing the end-result of normalization instead of the inevitably troublesome interactions marking the inauguration of Sino-US diplomatic dialogue, the historical period of rapprochement is essentially colonized by a retrospective gaze. This generates a sense of awkwardness, with one historian expressing it in the following way (emphasis added):

“With the benefit of hindsight, some observers have contended that the U.S.-China opening was obvious, necessary, and almost inevitable (*although no one said that at the time*).”⁴⁷⁰

Hindsight is hardly beneficial if it is employed for the sake of post hoc rationalization.⁴⁷¹ If scholars looking back at this period obscure the highly tentative and inchoate character of rapprochement, then they not so much exhaust the subject matter as they police the boundaries of acceptable explanations. They stifle the puzzle of normalization in the service of a grand narrative, which seeks not to *nurture the strangeness* of this episode but to relegate it to the unexciting automatism

⁴⁶⁹ Zhongqi Pan makes a proper conceptual effort at such an integration. For more see Zhongqi Pan, “Guanxi, Weiqi and Chinese Strategic Thinking,” *Chinese Political Science Review* 1, no. 2 (June 2016): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-016-0015-1>.

⁴⁷⁰ Jeremi Suri, “From Isolation to Engagement: American Diplomacy and the Opening to China, 1969-1972,” in *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy*, eds. Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 102.

⁴⁷¹ Jesse S. Summers, “Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc : Some Benefits of Rationalization,” *Philosophical Explorations* 20, no. sup1 (March 24, 2017): 21–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2017.1287292>.

associated with a structural shift. In such a setting, the turn to bilateral diplomacy is likewise *trivial*. It is reduced to a by-product of a confluence of strategic interests between erstwhile enemies.

In all fairness, the literature is not oblivious to the intense *diplomatic signaling* the two sides engage in towards the end of the 1960s. The US is well-documented to have deployed a plethora of unilateral gestures to seek out China's motivation. Some of these were reciprocated, others were unanswered by Beijing. Attempts were made by China, too, to demonstrate on occasion that its hostility towards the US is not set in stone. Mao's decision to have the American journalist Edgar Snow stand next to him at China's National Day parade on 1 October 1970 is claimed to be one such signal.⁴⁷² The "inscrutable Chairman was trying to convey something,"⁴⁷³ Kissinger recalls, but the subtlety of the message failed to register because the Americans' "crude Occidental minds completely missed the point."⁴⁷⁴ The interactions between China and the US relied, at this time, on the Pakistani channel, a key intermediary that helped relay messages between the two governments. The channel assisted in reaching an agreement for China to host a high-level emissary sent from Washington, a decision of profound implications for the subsequent unfolding of rapprochement. The interactive back-and-forth making up the period preceding rapprochement was, therefore, highly consequential. In this sense, the material to expose the incremental character of diplomatic change leading to normalization is *readily contained* in the strategic literature. The issue is that its importance is subjugated to the primacy of geopolitics. The breadcrumbs each side left to the other at this stage are deemed to be relevant *only so much as* they articulate a search for communication. The substantive purpose driving both sides in this search is taken to be

⁴⁷² If the recollections of Mao's personal nurse, Zhisui Li, are accurate, then Mao did have a purpose in mind for Snow. Li writes that Mao thought that "Snow must be working for the Central Intelligence Agency," and that "[w]e [the Chinese] have to give him some inside information." Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, 532.

⁴⁷³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 699.

⁴⁷⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 698.

preconceived – an intersubjectively shared desire for a strategic entente. The *eventual* meaning of the process is projected back into the past. The breadcrumbs are assumed to belong to the bread of geopolitics.

To reappraise the strategic rationale as an American social narrative, the following chapter focuses on the normative-institutional estrangement of the Nixon-administration from traditional ways of thinking about, and practicing, American foreign policy. It is argued that this estrangement is productive of an *un-American* concern with the international equilibrium, and that this concern is what fuels the American interest in diplomatic dialogue with China.

6. Departure from America – Towards an Impetus for Dialogue with China

6.1. Introduction

Chapter 5 reconstructed a particular predicament ailing the literature on US-China rapprochement. It has to do with the tendency for the literature not to differentiate the social-practical meaning of the strategic rationale from its use as a theoretical explanation. To a degree, this confusion is the result of the difficulty entailed in disentangling Kissinger the historian/analyst, on the one hand, from Kissinger the statesman, on the other. Because Kissinger spent his career writing of the qualities and skills associated with the good statesman,⁴⁷⁵ the impression is that his is a “projective biography.”⁴⁷⁶ Not only is he a practitioner who witnessed *it all* from the inside, he is a scholar armed with the conceptual vocabulary to make sense of his experience. The problem is that the literature is largely unreflective of the implications its relationship has with the different personae of Kissinger. Is he a social actor immersed in his own environment, or an academic removed from the level of action and reflecting on why he did what he did in practice? Much of the confusion evident in the literature stems from the assumption that Kissinger tells it like it *really* is.

This chapter begins by establishing this much-needed distinction: to understand the strategic rationale as a *narrative nurtured by social actors meant to guide practical action in their own historical context*, and to understand it as a *theoretical argument used to explain rapprochement in an objective-causal way*. The former belongs to a category of social practice, while the latter belongs to a category of scientific explanation. The first is the substance of what social actors tell themselves in making sense of their social environment, while the second is a logical account of the first expressed in abstract theoretical language. The previous chapter produced ample evidence

⁴⁷⁵ Stephen G. Walker, “The Interface between Beliefs and Behavior: Henry Kissinger’s Operational Code and the Vietnam War,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21, no. 1 (1977): 129–68.

⁴⁷⁶ Harvey Starr, “The Kissinger Years: Studying Individuals and Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (December 1980): 474, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600286>.

that collapsing the two categories is fraught with problems. To steer clear of such trouble, this chapter insists on the autonomy of the social-practical interpretation of the strategic rationale. To repeat, this rationale is neither a theoretical explanation, nor an objective description of a new Chinese identity. It is a characteristically American social narrative *about* China in the late 1960s. This social perspective is what allows the empirical study to be conducted on terms congruent with the analytical framework introduced in chapter 4. It helps reappraise the new narrative about China *as an expression of the social environment peculiar to the American decision-makers themselves*.

Two claims are put forward in this chapter. The first is that the Nixon-administration's decision-making environment was defined by a normative-institutional estrangement from *conventional ways of thinking about, and practicing, US foreign policy*. Normative estrangement operated *via* a rejection of traditional norms associated with American foreign policy, which were perceived to be stifling the ideational creativity sought by Nixon and Kissinger. Institutional estrangement operated *via* a physical-spatial distantiation from the American bureaucracy, which was perceived to be inhospitable for attempts to think differently about China. It was in this social setting that *thinking diplomatically* became necessary as well as possible. This setting provided the normative distance from which a reconceptualization of Sino-American relations was desirable (necessary), and it informed the recognition that doing so properly was only feasible (possible) away from the watchful eyes of the bureaucracy and the American public.

The second claim is that this *un-American* habitus of the Nixon-administration was productive of an un-American concern with the international order. In particular, Kissinger was focused on the international equilibrium, and fixing it was not possible in the ideological *zeitgeist* of the Cold War. Therefore, the realpolitik Kissinger emphasized in his writings was a *non-ideological raison de système*. Its elevation to official policy by the Nixon-administration replaced the entrenched

influence of Wilsonianism, a dominant tradition in US foreign policy Kissinger construed as incapacitating American diplomacy. This recalibration meant that the decades-long containment of China was no longer a reasonable foreign policy pursuit. This *unyoking* of the Wilsonian purpose of American foreign policy and the yoking of a new one based on realpolitik in its stead was, it is argued, a fundamental change.

This chapter is structured as follows. It begins with a discussion of the absence of diplomatic dialogue between China and the US after 1949 in general and two (non-)diplomatic incidents in particular. These fiascos are Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's infamous refusal to shake the hands of Zhou Enlai at the 1954 Geneva Conference, and the Chinese ambassador's fleeing the premises of the 1969 Yugoslav fashion show in Warsaw. The second section is focused on the un-Americanness of the Nixon-administration in power, in particular its normative-institutional estrangement and Kissinger's concern with the international equilibrium. The final section deals with events in China-US diplomacy leading up to China's invitation of a high-level American emissary to Beijing.

6.2. *The absence of diplomatic dialogue in Chinese-American relations after 1949*

For two decades after the PRC's proclamation on 1 October 1949, the US-China relationship was devoid of meaningful diplomatic dialogue. Interstate contacts were fleeting and kept to the bare minimum. Ambassadorial talks were occasionally held from 1955 through the Warsaw channel. To a degree, the talks helped manage ties through the turbulent 1960s,⁴⁷⁷ but they were insufficient in breaking through the historical impasse isolating the two countries. It was this barrier that President Nixon wanted to break. In July 1971, he argued that an attempt must be made in this direction (emphasis added): "For us not to do now what we can do to end this isolation would leave things very dangerous... *it means a dialogue, that is all.*"⁴⁷⁸ The vocabulary impresses a casual attitude, as if the initiation of dialogue is a straightforward endeavor. In opposition, Kissinger remarked that the challenge of opening towards China is nothing less than to create something out of nothing. Notwithstanding the absence of dialogue, ties between Washington and Beijing were *not nothing*. It was a relationship because the two sides *actively co-constituted* it as a social field. They reproduced it over time, making it function like a realm of intelligibility in which the necessity of diplomatic mediation was inconceivable. In what follows, the co-construction of this relationship of no dialogue is presented, along with the reasons for its persistent avoidance.

Many of the reasons for avoiding interstate communication between China and the US go back to World War II. In late 1945, the Marshall-mission came to China to mediate between the rival forces of the Chinese Civil War. The purpose was to facilitate the creation of a unified Chinese

⁴⁷⁷ Ya feng Xia, "Negotiating At Cross-Purposes: Sino-American Ambassadorial Talks, 1961–68," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16, no. 2 (2005): 297–329, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290590948360>.

⁴⁷⁸ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 190.

government.⁴⁷⁹ Its activities, however, were watched with suspicion by the Communists because of Washington's overt preference for the Nationalists. The mission failed, therefore, not just to bring closer the two sides vying for power in China, but to dispel the impression that the US is unlikely to support a CCP-government to rule China. Following the PRC's proclamation, the existing antagonism was deepened by the Ward incident, which also made the extension of diplomatic recognition by the US an improbable prospect.⁴⁸⁰ The incident was the first of many future diplomatic skirmishes resulting from Beijing's insistence on a key formula in its external affairs.⁴⁸¹ If foreign powers wish to establish official relations with the Beijing government, they can do so only by severing ties with the Nationalist regime on Taiwan.⁴⁸² By detaining Angus Ward and his staff on 20 November 1949, the Beijing government indicated that diplomats of Western countries withholding recognition will be treated "as ordinary foreign residents."⁴⁸³

The PRC's involvement in the Korean War in 1950 further cemented the view in Washington that the Beijing government is an aggressor bent on spreading communism beyond its borders and upsetting the regional status quo. Internationally, Zhou Enlai's "conciliatory diplomacy" succeeded in challenging US containment at the 1954 Geneva Conference and the 1955 Bandung Conference,⁴⁸⁴ with countries of the Non-Aligned Movement particularly impressed by the

⁴⁷⁹ Michael H. Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁴⁸⁰ Post-war debates in the US about East Asia focused a great deal on *who lost China* to communism. Some commentators debated the very premise of the question, claiming there never was a chance for normal relations with Beijing after the Second World War. Others argued the mutual antagonism after 1949 was not a foregone conclusion. As Clausen argues, "the leadership of the Communist Party of China did not necessarily want to 'lean to one side' by relying on the Soviet Union. Mao wanted to go to Washington but Washington did not extend the invitation." Edwin G. Clausen, "U.S.-China Relations in the Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Third World Studies* 10, no. 1 (1993): 129.

⁴⁸¹ Chen Jian claims that China's handling of the Ward incident is proof that the new communist regime never sought the recognition of the US in 1949. See Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 39.

⁴⁸² Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 33.

⁴⁸³ Zhang, "In the Shadow of Mao: Zhou Enlai and China's New Diplomacy," 345.

⁴⁸⁴ Zhang, 360; Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 87.

Chinese Premier's performance.⁴⁸⁵ American diplomacy was, however, unaffected, and the estrangement between Washington and Beijing remained, if not worsened. In Geneva, an iconic fiasco came to embody the perceived meaninglessness of interstate contact. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles refused to shake the hands of Zhou Enlai because he "only saw in Zhou the 'Communist'."⁴⁸⁶ A symbol of the (anti-)diplomatic *zeitgeist* of the early Cold War, the incident outlived its immediate consequences, and left a lasting stain on American diplomacy. Indeed, when Nixon came to Beijing in February 1972, it was meant as a *walk to Canossa* to make up for Dulles' mistake. On arrival, Nixon reached out to his hosts and shook their hands. Importantly, he wanted to be seen as the initiator of the gesture.⁴⁸⁷

The Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954-55 and 1958 produced a mixed legacy with regards to the necessity of Sino-American dialogue. The crises broke out because of Mao's provocations in the Taiwan Strait, leading to accusations that the Chinese are irresponsible and an impression that the Chinese regime is irrational.⁴⁸⁸ Though the US strengthened its security commitment to Taiwan,⁴⁸⁹ the new regional status quo elevated the PRC to be an acknowledged geopolitical reality, no longer

⁴⁸⁵ The success of Chinese diplomacy was palpable not just in rallying neutral countries around a common cause and thereby breathing new life into what subsequently became the Non-Aligned Movement, but in dispelling some of the fears and concerns associated with Red China. As Lumumba-Kasongo writes, "Zhou Enlai of China displayed a moderate and conciliatory attitude that tended to quiet fears of some anticommunist delegates concerning China's intentions." Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo, "Rethinking the Bandung Conference in an Era of 'Unipolar Liberal Globalization' and Movements toward a 'Multipolar Politics,'" *Bandung: Journal of the Global South* 2, no. 1 (July 25, 2015): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40728-014-0012-4>.

⁴⁸⁶ Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 77.

⁴⁸⁷ Kissinger reproduces the importance of the gesture thus: "When the time came, a burly aide blocked the aisle of *Air Force One*. Our puzzled Chinese hosts must have wondered what had happened to the rest of the official party that usually flies down the steps right behind the President. We all appeared magically – moments after the historic Nixon-Chou handshake had been consummated in splendid isolation." Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1054–55.

⁴⁸⁸ Gordon Chang and He Di, "The Absence of War in the U.S.-China Confrontation over Quemoy and Matsu in 1954–1955: Contingency, Luck, Deterrence?," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (December 1993): 1514.

⁴⁸⁹ Hsiao-Ting Lin, "U.S.-Taiwan Military Diplomacy Revisited: Chiang Kai-Shek, Baituan, and the 1954 Mutual Defense Pact," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 5 (November 1, 2013): 971–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht047>.

just a temporary anomaly until the Nationalists recuperate the mainland.⁴⁹⁰ The crises also breathed new life into the Ambassadorial Talks in Warsaw, which confirmed this geopolitical reality and the necessity of *some* communication. Far from a dialogue of the deaf, the Warsaw talks were helpful in its “latent function,” by exposing the two sides to each other and enhancing a modicum of bilateral familiarity.⁴⁹¹

Overall, the talks were limited by the absence of official ties and thus failed to reach meaningful progress in bilateral concerns between 1955 and 1970. At this time, the US could not compromise on the majority of issues as long as tensions were high in the Taiwan Strait. In 1958, Mao reaffirmed “tension diplomacy” and “limited belligerency” as the primary compass of Chinese foreign affairs towards the Western countries, with the objective of “consolidating socialism, fighting against the United States, and bringing down imperialism.”⁴⁹² The mutual antagonism left little room for improvement in the early to mid-1960s. Consumed by the Sino-Soviet split and the Cultural Revolution, Chinese communist diplomacy entered a genuinely irrational phase. As “red diplomatic fighters” took over,⁴⁹³ Zhou Enlai’s more diplomatic notion of “strategically despising the enemy while taking full account of him tactically” was suspended.⁴⁹⁴ During this phase of the relationship, critics agree that Washington made a few cautious steps to demonstrate its willingness to engage the Chinese leadership, but Beijing was not in a position to reciprocate. Much of the Chinese government’s attention was focused on the recovery from the Great Leap Forward in the

⁴⁹⁰ After 1949, American administrations were aware that despite their nominal support for Chiang Kai-shek, the incompetence of his regime is cause for concern and may necessitate a reappraisal of US China policy. The White Paper published in 1949 thus raised the “danger of tying the United States irrevocably to a regime that was rapidly discrediting itself and might well be unable to survive.” United States, *United States Relations with China, with Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), 3.

⁴⁹¹ Goldstein, “Dialogue of the Deaf,” 236.

⁴⁹² Zhang, “In the Shadow of Mao: Zhou Enlai and China’s New Diplomacy,” 362.

⁴⁹³ Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 150.

⁴⁹⁴ Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 46.

early 1960s, and when the Chinese economy was finally approaching its pre-crisis performance, the Cultural Revolution broke out only to render Chinese diplomacy dysfunctional and incapable of discharging its purpose.

What concluded the 1960s was another incident illustrating the downright inconceivability of diplomatic dialogue. At the December 1969 Yugoslavian fashion exhibition held in Warsaw, US ambassador William Stoessel in vain tried to approach his Chinese counterpart to suggest open and serious talks between the two countries. Lei Yang was caught off guard by the impossibility of the situation and decided to flee the premises.⁴⁹⁵ When the Nixon-administration assumed office, its reliance on the Pakistani channel confirmed the indispensability of a go-between to mediate Sino-American ties.

⁴⁹⁵ Stoessel nevertheless managed to convey to the Chinese interpreter in “broken Polish” that he would like to forward an important message to the Chinese embassy. Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 250.

6.3. *Two fiascos of US-China diplomacy*

The two incidents briefly reconstructed in this section are, first, Dulles' refusal to shake the hand of Zhou Enlai in Geneva in 1954, and, second, the Chinese ambassador's fleeing the premises of the Yugoslav fashion show in Warsaw in 1969. Both of them testify to the impossibility of dialogue by one side refusing to share copresence in diplomacy. Both of them are examples in which the way out of the situation is available *via* an embracing of practical incompetence, by choosing social awkwardness. The result of this choice in both cases is that the very site meant for a diplomatic encounter is emptied out of its diplomatic potential. The bodies implicated in these non-meetings are not diplomatic as there is no common script to be re-inscribed upon them.⁴⁹⁶ Dulles's refusal in 1954 is an instance illustrating that the moral purpose embodied by the American secretary of state mitigated against making physical contact with the Chinese Premier. In this case, the radical difference dominating the American perception of China informed Dulles' bodily disposition to refuse the handshake. In doing so, Dulles chose to *act out* the American view of China rather than risk going against it by complying with a courtesy gesture of the diplomatic practice. His heavily ideological understanding of Zhou's stance pulled in the direction of rendering the situation non-diplomatic. That is, the fiasco came about because of Dulles' *certainty* of the undesirable implications of the handshake. The Chinese ambassador's fleeing is a fiasco that came about because of his *uncertainty* regarding the consequences of engaging with the American representative seeking to approach him.

In Geneva, it was the mutual extension of legitimacy and acceptance that Dulles rejected by refusing to touch the Chinese. This was a highly anti-diplomatic move by the most senior diplomat

⁴⁹⁶ Iver B. Neumann, "The Body of the Diplomat," *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 4 (December 2008): 671–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108097557>.

of the American government. Dulles was explicit that the US cannot be seen as associating with China at the conference:

“we maintain our refusal to give it [China] any position of preferment, or to contribute to the enhancement of its authority and prestige.”⁴⁹⁷

Because Zhou Enlai is the archetypical communist in the American conscience, any indication, physical or otherwise, to the possibility of coexistence was discouraged. Dulles expressed the one circumstance in which they can meet is if their “automobiles collide.”⁴⁹⁸ Just as Dulles invested in explaining the rationality of the absence of a diplomatic approach towards the Chinese representative, Zhou excelled at enacting a wealth of diplomatic practices in Geneva duly recognized by participants other than the US. Notwithstanding such performance as congruent with diplomacy, its competence does not register in the American perspective. At this time, the American calculus towards China revolved around a moral purpose that did not allow the deciphering of Zhou in terms of a diplomat. Such an interpretation was not meaningful in practical terms. Dulles framed the US-China relationship in a way that accepting Zhou’s handshake would have constituted a social transgression.

The fiasco in Warsaw was of a different kind. Kissinger presents it by relying on the Chinese attaché’s account:

“The Chinese attaché’s account of the incident shows how constrained relations had become. Interviewed years later, he recalled seeing two Americans talking and pointing at the Chinese contingent from across the room; this prompted the Chinese to stand up and leave, lest they be drawn into conversation. The Americans, determined to carry out their instructions, followed the Chinese. When the desperate Chinese diplomats speeded up, the Americans started running after them, shouting in Polish

⁴⁹⁷ Quoted in Zhai Qiang, “China and the Geneva Conference of 1954,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 129 (1992): 114.

⁴⁹⁸ Qiang, “China and the Geneva Conference of 1954,” 114.

(the only mutually intelligible language available), “We are from American embassy. We want to meet your ambassador... President Nixon said he wanted to resume his talk with Chinese [sic].”⁴⁹⁹

The incident speaks to the difficulty of starting a dialogue from scratch, even if the very message to be transmitted *is simply the willingness to start a dialogue*. This was the meaning to be communicated, but the Chinese ambassador fled, and the fashion show did not turn into a site of first contact.⁵⁰⁰ The behavior of the Chinese diplomat is not so much puzzling because the attempt was essentially a practical contradiction. Washington sought to initiate more serious and direct communication, but it wished to communicate *this much* in personal dialogue. The attempt, if successful, would have set a precedent and created some of the practical terms under which the two countries’ representatives can engage. The Chinese diplomat was unprepared *substantially* to respond to the American initiative, but he was also unprepared in a *dispositional* way.

The escape from the premises is evidence that no practical sense was intersubjectively available to govern the encounter. Stoessel stepped up, trying to talk to his Chinese colleague, but the latter realized that the very *act of speaking* with an American representative is powerfully symbolic. Most likely, the reaction came not because the Chinese diplomat was uninitiated in the intricacies of interpersonal diplomacy, as if the template of appropriate social response was altogether missing. A more plausible explanation is that the Chinese diplomat was *sufficiently alienated* from the social field to realize that there is more than one way to make sense of this very template. The difference in normative implications is obvious. With a record of little to no diplomatic engagement for two decades, the courtesy response is not simply a courtesy response. Because the social site was practically unregulated, it was a sort of *tabula rasa*. The Chinese diplomat was

⁴⁹⁹ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2011), 221.

⁵⁰⁰ Neumann, *Diplomatic Sites*.

cognizant that it cannot be populated with improvisation because of the normative and political consequences of such behavior. Instead, the Chinese ambassador may have recognized that the absence of official diplomatic dialogue between his country and the US makes him a pioneer of sorts, a first diplomat indeed. Whatever his response, bodily or otherwise, it would have been highly consequential to the state of affairs in Chinese-American relations, more so than he was willing to shoulder singlehandedly. Fleeing the scene was, therefore, a personal refusal, a sovereign decision not to be interpellated in the social field by relying on either of these templates available for action. His social response was, therefore, to opt out – to choose awkwardness by *refusing* to respond.

Overall, attempts were few and far between to break through the impasse evident in the bilateral relationship since 1949. Those that succeeded were ephemeral, falling short of the endurance and depth required for bilateral diplomacy to be sustainable. A particular realm of intelligibility dominated because it was intersubjectively accepted. It mitigated against conceiving the necessity of dialogue, and it also fueled the respective identity claims of self and other. Red China and the Imperial United States were stuck in enmity, and each contributed to re-constituting their *non-relationship as a meaningful* social field. The foreign policies of the two countries corresponded to the respective frames in which the other party was *othered*. A portrayal of unbridgeable difference explained the necessity of both containing China by the US, on the one hand, and toppling US imperialism by China, on the other.

These meanings were neither objective nor carved into stone, however. They fulfilled a practical function by *making possible* that which the respective sides ambitioned to achieve internationally. The sense of mutual enmity was yoked. The absence of dialogue informed a moral purpose under which the avoidance of diplomacy was *practically reasonable*. This purpose boiled down to the

intersubjective rejection of coexistence, the commitment by both the US and China that the *existence of the one inevitably comes at the expense of the existence of the other*. Conceptions of world order specific to each party were, therefore, irreconcilable.⁵⁰¹ But if these understandings were also social constructions, then the way out of this state of affairs is the same as the way in. To get rid of enmity is to first make it strange. To make it strange is to *unyoke* its practical purpose, and to yoke a new one in its stead. Coming to power in January 1969, such was the explicit ambition of the Nixon-administration. Its technique of doing so was to estrange not China, but the very American practices – normative and institutional – that produced China for two decades as an enemy of the US.

⁵⁰¹ Kissinger, *On China*, 57.

6.4. *An un-American administration in power and an un-American view of world politics*⁵⁰²

In October 1967, Nixon penned an article in *Foreign Affairs* titled *Asia After Viet Nam*. Dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in the region, Nixon articulated a rudimentary sense of having to do *something different* with China:

“[T]aking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors.”⁵⁰³

Though expressing the desirability of change, the text continued to rely on a key element of the mainstream American discourse about China. Specifically, it expected China to change *before* the bilateral relationship itself can be transformed. Just as American administrations perceived Mao’s “intransigence and defiance” to render any rapprochement inconceivable until 1969,⁵⁰⁴ Nixon likewise accepted that normalization is possible only if the Beijing government abandons its revolutionary practices. In this process of (*re-*)*socialization*, the role of the US was that of persuasion. It is to convince China that

“it cannot satisfy its imperial ambitions, and that its own national interest requires a turning away from foreign adventuring and a turning inward toward the solution of its own domestic problems.”⁵⁰⁵

Nixon could not have foreseen that the much-needed transformation he wrote of in 1967 occurred not in the behavior of China, but *in the American perspective of China*, and that he and his national

⁵⁰² Kissinger refers to the administration as un-American in Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1089.

⁵⁰³ Richard M. Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967): 121, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20039285>.

⁵⁰⁴ Zhai Qiang, “China and America: A Troubled Relationship,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 7, no. 1–2 (1998): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187656198X00054>.

⁵⁰⁵ Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” 121.

security advisor would have a key role in facilitating this change of perspective. Richard Nixon assumed the American presidency on 20 January 1969. Henry Kissinger acted as his national security advisor from day one. Having emigrated from Germany in the 1930s, Kissinger was a migrant. He never managed to shed all remnants of his outsider status in an otherwise welcoming society. Nixon happened to be a fellow stranger, having emerged from the margins of the Republican Party, keen to make his mark on the vast canvass of American history. Together, the two individuals made for strange bedfellows. Their contempt for many things, like checks and balances on governmental power as well as their critics, united them, all the while they remained strangers to each other.⁵⁰⁶ Their relationship practically upended political tradition, “placing the outsiders who had operated on the fringes of power in the driver’s seat.”⁵⁰⁷ In large part, their penchant for being socially removed from the American machinery emanated from their respective personal stories.

The desire for separation was embodied in institutional changes that became the hallmark of the Nixon-administration’s basic *modus operandi*. These changes erected an impenetrable wall between the decision-making circles in which political power was concentrated, on the one hand, and the rest of the bureaucracy, on the other. The steady *personalization* of policy was informed by an intentional disregard for constraints upon presidential prerogatives. It also led to the empowerment of the National Security Council. At the helm of the advisory body, Kissinger was allowed unprecedented access to steering American foreign policy. The arrangement enabled something of an *imperial*, if not gangster-like,⁵⁰⁸ presidency. Nixon relied on his energetic and creative national security advisor, and Kissinger pursued controversial foreign policy initiatives

⁵⁰⁶ Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (London: Belknap, 2009), 202.

⁵⁰⁷ Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 204.

⁵⁰⁸ This interpretation appears in Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 210.

while leaving the rest of the bureaucracy purposefully uninformed. Kissinger's was something of a liminal position,⁵⁰⁹ firmly on the inside as the personal presidential overseer of foreign affairs, but also outside "the clubby establishment elite."⁵¹⁰ His institutional place, coupled with his informal power under the supervision of a president prone to excessive manipulation, allowed him to practice sovereign diplomacy akin to the 16th and 17th century.⁵¹¹ It was not just secrecy that defined his social setting, it was the exorbitant amount of discretion he enjoyed.

The control Kissinger accrued came directly at the expense of the State Department.⁵¹² Decision-making power was consciously leached away from Foggy Bottom.⁵¹³ In late 1969, Nixon acidly remarked that "if the State Department has had a new idea in the last twenty-five years, it is not known to me."⁵¹⁴ Kissinger's contempt is equally well-known. Prioritizing what he termed a *conceptual* approach to foreign affairs,⁵¹⁵ he found the complexity and dull routinization of institutional processes to be obstacles in the way of creative policy-making. The bureaucracy was focused on its own inertia. It is hopelessly bogged down in standards of operating procedures, making its internal logic essentially self-serving. This quagmire of the bureaucracy was not, however, a property unique to the US political system. Kissinger criticized American domestic affairs on various occasions, but this particular problem was of a more general nature. It had to do with the modern bureaucratic state, which "widens the range of technical choices while limiting

⁵⁰⁹ Maria Mälksoo, "The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 02 (April 2012): 481–94.

⁵¹⁰ Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 205.

⁵¹¹ Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 58.

⁵¹² Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 223.

⁵¹³ Robert Pringle, "Creeping Irrelevance at Foggy Bottom," *Foreign Policy*, no. 29 (1977): 128–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148535>.

⁵¹⁴ Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide*, 32.

⁵¹⁵ Larry David Nachman, "The Intellectual in Power: The Case of Henry Kissinger," *Salmagundi*, no. 70/71 (1986): 234–56.

the capacity to make them.”⁵¹⁶ To think about external affairs differently required a distance from the numbing influence of this machinery.

Isolation from the bureaucracy was not for its own sake. It reflected Kissinger’s utmost concern with the national interest and the *necessity of choice*. His ideational creativity revolved around an understanding that foreign policy depends “on some conception of the future.” The imperative “of a conceptual design for the conduct of foreign policy was,” Kissinger explains, “a conviction Nixon and I shared.”⁵¹⁷ This was reflected in the 1970 foreign policy report submitted to Congress, which famously stressed that “[o]ur interests must shape our commitments, rather than the other way around.”⁵¹⁸ The role reflexivity plays in identifying this fit between interest and commitment is difficult to miss. To rescue choice from circumstance,⁵¹⁹ an ongoing reflection of what is to be done and for what purpose, is necessary. Blinded by its idealist orthodoxy, American foreign policy was oblivious, in Kissinger’s view, that such deliberation is productive of alternatives, and that the trajectory of the country’s foreign policy is not set in stone. The reversal engendered by the Nixon-doctrine pronounced in 1969 was testimony that the new administration engaged in such a recalibration.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 95.

⁵¹⁷ Winston Lord, *Kissinger on Kissinger: Reflections on Diplomacy, Grand Strategy, and Leadership*, 1st ed. (New York: All Points Books, 2019), 1.

⁵¹⁸ Louis J. Smith, David H. Herschler, eds, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1976*, vol. I. Document 60. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2003). Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d60>.

⁵¹⁹ This is the insightful title of John Lewis Gaddis’ chapter on Kissinger. See John Lewis Gaddis, “Rescuing Choice from Circumstance: The Statecraft of Henry Kissinger,” in *The Diplomats, 1939-79*, eds. Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 564–93.

⁵²⁰ Much like in the case of ping-pong diplomacy, the Nixon-doctrine was not, however, reflective of a change in US foreign policy preconceived by the American president. See Jeffrey Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 2006): 59–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00287.x>.

In making the case for the necessity of choice, Kissinger explicitly framed foreign policy as a *policy of priorities*. But properly deliberating over priorities required a particular *technique of thinking*, and this technique forced the practitioner to the margins of the institutional boundaries of government. Kissinger stressed, in particular, the notion of *conjecture*,⁵²¹ which offered a way to conceptualize *beyond* the limits of conventional policy discourse. This technique involved “a moral act” because its validity depended “on a conception of goals as much as on an understanding of the available material.”⁵²² Because organizational settings come with a corresponding conceptual prison in which questions of policy are routinely settled, this kind of social space stifles, rather than welcomes, critical discussions seeking to depart from options that are given by default. In embracing conjecture, Kissinger estranged his fellow bureaucrats. Ordinary government officials bank on certainty. They await until most available facts are at disposal, in order to minimize the chances that a decision backfires. In opposition, statesmen worthy of their name willingly act on *suppositions* that may or may not be true. In Kissinger’s argument (emphasis added):

“Every statesman must choose at some point between whether he wishes certainty or whether he wishes to rely on his assessment of the situation. If one wants demonstrable proof one in a sense *becomes a prisoner of events*.”⁵²³

Foreign policy based on certainty is nonsensical as independent states behave in their own unpredictable ways. This awareness imposes a primary responsibility on the statesman to make a *sovereign* decision about the appropriate policy in any particular moment, rather than to resign in

⁵²¹ Niall Ferguson, “The Meaning of Kissinger: A Realist Reconsidered,” *Foreign Affairs*, no. September/October (2015): 134–43.

⁵²² Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812–22*, Sentry Edition 79 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 325.

⁵²³ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 327.

the face of always changing circumstances. This was, therefore, the technique employed by a self-styled revolutionary statesman to think outside the box.

Reliance on this technique reveals another key aspect of Kissinger's method of thinking. It is its *imaginative* character. In fact, despite the impression he created of himself as a *no-nonsense realist*, whose historically exceptional mission is to *de-exceptionalize* America in an ocean of states driven by the same mundane interests,⁵²⁴ Kissinger was an idealist in attempting to *naturalize* a vision of international relations alien to his adopted home. This technique is not inexplicable from a theoretical perspective. Conjecture follows a utopian, idealistic logic. Though utopianism is generally taken to be counter-productive for diplomacy, there is a difference between *substantive* utopianism and utopianism denoting a *practical form of conceptualization*.⁵²⁵ It can refer to a "way of thinking, to a mentality, to a philosophical attitude," which aspires to transcend what is in the direction of what should be in its stead.

If utopianism is "social dreaming,"⁵²⁶ it resembles the visionary element of diplomatic thinking. Watson stresses this quality in writing that diplomacy is "capable of great imaginative achievements, both in the settlement of disputes and in the realization of joint endeavours,"⁵²⁷ but only if great powers are not myopic but keep their eye on the systemic reason of international order. In a similar vein, Sharp emphasizes that diplomats are often forced to commute between

⁵²⁴ Mario Del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 8.

⁵²⁵ Der Derian stresses that there is a historical example for a substantive utopianism supporting diplomacy. He claims that the early anarchist and terrorist utopias were counter-utopias. They were employed against their 17th century predecessors that aimed for "a reinstitution of a universal monarchy." Fighting against a return to universal monarchy, the diplomatic character of these counter-utopias consisted in supporting a "fragmented, secular system of individual states." The substantive utopianism of these attempts revealed a normative preference for a particular arrangement in international politics. Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 155.

⁵²⁶ Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 246 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13.

⁵²⁷ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 215.

two frameworks of reference: “the professional universe of how things are supposed to be, and the political universe of how they very often actually are.”⁵²⁸ Estranging the one from the other produces an awareness that there is such a divide, and that the diplomatic practitioner has a role to play in attempting to close this gap. Indeed, it will be shown that conjecture was at play in reimagining US-China relations in light of a new moral purpose that informed the turn to diplomatic dialogue.

Overall, the Nixon-administration’s preference for *doing things alone* was the primary driver of its estrangement. Its very first foreign policy report to Congress was prepared by the National Security Council, without contribution or clearance from the State Department regarding its substance.⁵²⁹ Once it became dissatisfied with the transparency of the Warsaw channel, which was controlled more from the State Department than from the White House, the administration steadily invested in numerous *back-channels* to communicate with the Chinese unencumbered by the bureaucracy. From the very start, the rationale of such attempts was to relay Nixon’s interest in holding *secret* talks with the Chinese leadership.⁵³⁰ By the time rapprochement was under way, secrecy became a diplomatic practice *par excellence*. It was the logical consequence of a domestic institutional arrangement that sought to keep everyone in the dark about the administration’s specific undertakings in foreign policy.

Kissinger’s aspiration to be a *revolutionary* statesman is what explains the necessity of this un-American institutional arrangement.⁵³¹ Crudely put, the Nixon-Kissinger leadership nurtured its own isolation because it claimed that the rest of the American public and the elite *would simply*

⁵²⁸ Sharp, “For Diplomacy,” 51.

⁵²⁹ Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide*, 32.

⁵³⁰ Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide*, 39.

⁵³¹ Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 200.

not understand the ideas it experimented with. It wanted to speak a language whose grammar and vocabulary was not indigenous to the domestic audience, and to practically embody this language in American diplomacy. That institutional estrangement is productive of a normative estrangement, and *vice versa*, is a connection Kissinger makes in his writings. As “prince of realpolitik,” Kissinger wanted to “put his remarkable insights to the service of a nation in deep trouble.”⁵³² Doing so was impossible unless the social distance productive of such un-American thoughts is at disposal. It was by estranging his adopted home that Kissinger secured the normative space for creativity.

Prior to becoming national security advisor to Nixon, Kissinger wrote of his dissatisfaction with the *status quo* in the US and in international affairs. He saw nothing but a “perilous landscape” full of crises at home and around the world.⁵³³ Fixing them required challenging old assumptions about the Cold War, and transcending conventional ways of settling questions in international politics.⁵³⁴ The disdain for Wilsonianism is at the heart of this basic dissatisfaction. It had to do with the conviction that American foreign policy is dysfunctional, and that this dysfunctionality stemmed from the decades-long influence of idealism. It was also, by extension, one of the reasons for a world in disarray in the late 1960s. Hearing a “babel of incoherent sound” around the globe, Kissinger set out to transform the international order by turning the disturbing cacophony into “concerted music.”⁵³⁵

⁵³² Quoted in Thomas A. Schwartz, “Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 1 (March 15, 2011): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2011.549746>.

⁵³³ Lord, *Kissinger on Kissinger*, 1.

⁵³⁴ Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 200.

⁵³⁵ Watson, *Diplomacy*, 54.

For Kissinger, the moralism and idealism making up the Wilsonian legacy is what informed “the inherent vulnerability of American diplomacy.”⁵³⁶ It led to a perception hard-wired in most Americans, notably that “while other nations have interests, we have responsibilities.”⁵³⁷ What is worse, these nations are concerned with the international equilibrium, while the US is focused on peace, to be attained *via* instruments of international law. Kissinger argued that this notion disguised an expectation that there is an “underlying harmony” in world politics, and that diplomacy is meant for no more than *enacting* this pre-existing harmony. This was profoundly incompatible with the nature of international order *as identified* by Kissinger himself:

“Political multipolarity makes it impossible to impose an American design. Our deepest challenge will be to evoke the creativity of a pluralistic world, to base order on political multipolarity even though overwhelming military strength will remain with the two superpowers.”⁵³⁸

The passage refers not just to the basic human condition of having to exist in *relations of separateness*,⁵³⁹ but to the *utopian* objective of forcing an American design onto the rest of the world. By denying political multipolarity, American foreign policy is geared towards an *anti-diplomatic* purpose. In addition, the default passivity informed by the idealism of American diplomacy is ill-suited to bringing about this alternative of a ‘pluralistic world.’ The Wilsonian assumption regarding the self-assertion of international harmony is unhelpful because the task at hand requires *proactivity*. That is, finding a way “for American power to meet the critical need for an agreed concept of order” was possible only if American statesmen practically invested

⁵³⁶ Sofer, *The Courtiers of Civilization*, 20.

⁵³⁷ Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 92.

⁵³⁸ Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 58.

⁵³⁹ Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

themselves in its realization.⁵⁴⁰ Eventually, not only did Kissinger seek to unchain American foreign policy from the Wilsonian tradition, he also wanted to give expression to it by way of an *applied diplomatic practice*. A more activist policy substance required a more forceful technique of implementation.

To free American diplomacy from the idealist straitjacket, defined the function of American idealism in an unconventional way. Its role was to be limited to providing “the faith to sustain America through all the ambiguities of choice in an imperfect world.”⁵⁴¹ The reformulation locates the value of American idealism as a resource to persevere for the sake of a stable world order. Idealism was meant, therefore, neither as an ill-conceived responsibility to remake other states according to the US’s own image, nor as a license to wait around until the “underlying harmony of the world would simply reassert itself.”⁵⁴² The distancing from the idealist tradition paved the way not just for a “usable definition” of American national interest,⁵⁴³ no longer assumed to be historically unchanging and transcendent. It also counteracted the US’s anti-diplomatic impulses with the claim that national interests are not discovered in isolation, but are forged in the country’s relationships with the rest of the world.

The making strange of the Wilsonian legacy took place by reference to an un-American *conception* of international relations. The unyoking of American foreign policy happened because Kissinger interpreted it as downright counterproductive for what he yoked as its new purpose. This alternative objective was rooted in a particular worldview Kissinger claims to have *brought to the United States from Europe*. Having emigrated from Germany in the 1930s, Kissinger’s insistence

⁵⁴⁰ William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (Beverly Hills, California: Phoenix Audio, 2008), 4.

⁵⁴¹ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 834.

⁵⁴² Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 835.

⁵⁴³ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 834.

on political power and its indispensability in creating order was articulated in a language of realpolitik. This language is what made him a stranger to the normative scaffolding historically supporting American foreign policy. The undoing of this scaffolding was the very meaning of the un-Americanness of the Nixon-administration. In short, it was to *adjust* “to a world fundamentally different from our [American] historical perception.”⁵⁴⁴

The meaning of this alternative world reflected a *raison de système* antithetical to the spirit of the Cold War. It revolved around the conviction that the domestic governance systems of foreign countries *should be irrelevant* for American foreign policy. This ideal of decoupling the internal and external layers of state behavior was meant to improve upon the structure of international order itself. The dominant *raison de système* of the Cold War was tied to a bipolar structure informed by the rigidity of ideological considerations. Kissinger criticized this arrangement for being unstable and exposed to the twists and turns of the bilateral relationship between the two superpowers. The expansion of this bipolarity into multipolarity was to work by inviting China to the table of the great managers of international order. Repairing the equilibrium was, therefore, the systemic reason in which the turn to China became a rational foreign policy pursuit. Indeed, improving ties with China was not meant for the settling of petty disputes, by airing a “shopping list of mutual irritations.”⁵⁴⁵ It was an indispensable step towards inaugurating a new grand strategic design.

This turn to realpolitik was a problem, however, because American foreign policy under the yoke of Wilsonianism is unwelcoming of the premises of such a European approach. Though this conflict is recounted in different ways, the clash boils down to the incompatibility of “the concepts

⁵⁴⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1089.

⁵⁴⁵ Kissinger, *On China*, 221.

of Richelieu and the ideas of Wilson.” The former expresses foreign policy as a balancing of interest, and has a key role for diplomacy to play in the process, while the latter views diplomacy as “an affirmation of an underlying harmony,”⁵⁴⁶ and therefore relegates it to passivity. This difference explains why Richelieu’s notion of *raison d’état* tended to be “repugnant to Americans.”⁵⁴⁷ The younger generation is no exception, Kissinger wrote in 1968, in considering “the management of power irrelevant, perhaps even *immoral*.”⁵⁴⁸ The realist axiom that the interests of the state justify the means used to pursue them was antithetical to the American experience. It contradicted the conviction that foreign policy be guided by moral principles rather than by considerations of raw interest. In such discussions, Kissinger estranged what he construed as the American *ideal* of foreign policy as well as its historical practice, and juxtaposed it with the alternative offered by *realpolitik*.⁵⁴⁹ In doing so, his normative preference for the one rather than the other is obvious.

⁵⁴⁶ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 822.

⁵⁴⁷ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 810.

⁵⁴⁸ Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 95.

⁵⁴⁹ Kuschnitzki’s concept of ‘diplomatic discretion’ appears applicable in this case. It describes the ability to freely navigate between “contrasting normative expectations.” By making the case for *realpolitik* to drive American foreign policy, Kissinger invested in creating these contrasting normative templates. See Judit Kuschnitzki, “Navigating Discretion: A Diplomatic Practice in Moments of Socio-Political Rupture,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14, no. 4 (November 15, 2019): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14401074>.

6.5. *The beginnings of US-China dialogue*

Kissinger's stance on China policy went through a thorough transformation from 1969 until his secret trip to Beijing in July 1971. The change was triggered in response to events unfolding in the Sino-Soviet rivalry and the possibility of war between them. The State Department and federal agencies were actively involved in interpreting the nature of this conflict. Over time, however, the Nixon-administration became invested in manipulating the nascent relations with China according to its own understanding. Kissinger sought to *detach* China policy from the State Department. He relied on a conception of goals in light of which he came to appreciate the worsening conflict in Sino-Soviet ties as a possibility for change. This ambition coincided with Nixon's growing interest in communicating with Beijing outside of public channels. Ultimately, with a mixture of unilateral gestures and focused messaging, the Chinese came to accept the American desire of sending a high-level emissary to Beijing. This emissary turned out to be Kissinger. It is argued that his experience of the trip and the interpretation in which he made sense of it were the very *genesis* of the strategic rationale. The Chinese leaders, in particular, fulfilled an indispensable role by being interpellated in the conception of this rationale.

In early 1969, Kissinger was not only uninterested in China, he found the president's call to explore "alternative views and interpretations of the issues involved" in US China policy *perplexing*.⁵⁵⁰ He was befuddled by the suggestion that this policy can be significantly altered (emphasis added):

"Our leader has taken leave of reality ... He thinks this is the moment to establish normal relations with Communist China. He has just ordered me to make this *flight of fancy come true*. China!"⁵⁵¹

⁵⁵⁰ This is the task to be conducted at Nixon's direction in National Security Study Memorandum 14 from 5 February 1969. Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 4, 8.

⁵⁵¹ Quoted in Alexander Meigs Haig and Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 257.

Events between China and the Soviet Union were the context in which this reconfiguration was supposed to take place. In the spring of 1969, Sino-Soviet hostility led to border skirmishes between the two parties. The US assessed the antagonism by framing China as more aggressive than the Soviet Union.⁵⁵² Clashes in March, May, and June, were all interpreted as due to Beijing's provocations.⁵⁵³ The possibility that China's is a *rational behavior aimed at deterring Moscow* did not register for American observers. Not only was the Beijing government irresponsible in its relationship towards Moscow, its behavior informed the ongoing impasse between China and the US. Unilateral gestures made by the US were plenty at the time, including the easing of travel restrictions and those of the trade embargo. They were meant to indicate, in the words of Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green, that "it is Peking, not Washington, that is isolating China."⁵⁵⁴

Throughout 1969, Kissinger was not only "skeptical" of such attempts, his understanding of the Sino-Soviet rivalry was incomplete. When external assessors were involved in deliberating over NSSM 63 in August, Allen Whiting recalls having suggested to Kissinger that the US should *do what it can* to make the PRC identify the USSR as its primary threat.⁵⁵⁵ *Engineering* this shift in China's perspective was expected to be conducive for improving US-China relations. The necessity of doing so had to do with the *inability* of the PRC to make this realization *on its own*. Dated from 17 October 1969, NSSM 63 conveyed this impression clearly (emphasis added):

"Since many of the handicaps which encumber Chinese foreign policy are of their own making, the way to greater international maneuverability is open to them—if they choose to use it."⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵² Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 37.

⁵⁵³ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 80, 83.

⁵⁵⁴ Quoted in Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 82.

⁵⁵⁵ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 204.

⁵⁵⁶ Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 40, 110.

This implied that for China to seek improved ties with the US boiled down to a *matter of choice*, and it was assumed that the door towards better relations had already been opened by the US. The underlying rationale for Washington to encourage such a choice was, however, unclear. In May 1969, Kissinger was looking for answers to two essential questions: “What do we want from China over the longer term and what can we reasonably expect to do to influence that outcome?”⁵⁵⁷ The questions framed the dilemma of US China policy in terms of a conception of American foreign policy.

Events at the end of 1969 pushed in the direction of a resumption of dialogue. The US decided to remove its weapons from Okinawa in November, to which the Beijing government responded by releasing two American hostages in December. The two governments relied on the Pakistani channel to communicate that these steps are *to be understood as* gestures indeed.⁵⁵⁸ The intensive signal-reading and gesture-exchanging finally bore fruit and led to the January 1970 talks in Warsaw.⁵⁵⁹ At this time, Pakistani President Yahya Khan continued to assist in bridging the lack of bilateral familiarity between Washington and Beijing. He told the Americans that their unilateral initiatives *did* encourage the Chinese, but stressed that the “US should not regard Chinese readiness for meaningful dialogue as a sign of “weakness” or of “fear.””⁵⁶⁰ After the American invasion of Cambodia, however, China’s interest in continuing the talks was temporarily suspended.

Communications through the back channels proceeded, however, with Kissinger expressing in December 1970 that “[w]e remain prepared, at Warsaw, or elsewhere, to talk to the Communist Chinese about differences that divide us.”⁵⁶¹ Events in spring 1971 cemented the view in

⁵⁵⁷ Quoted in Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 85.

⁵⁵⁸ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 120.

⁵⁵⁹ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 127.

⁵⁶⁰ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 127.

⁵⁶¹ Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 143.

Washington of the “Chinese seriousness of the talks.”⁵⁶² Travel restrictions to the PRC were terminated, and China’s ping-pong diplomacy indicated to the US that the Beijing government is fully committed towards rapprochement. In April 1971, China finally delivered a message the US had been waiting for. This was the message Kissinger claimed is “the most important communication that has come to an American president since the end of World War II.”⁵⁶³ It was an invitation sent by Zhou Enlai:

“[T]he Chinese Government reaffirms its willingness to receive publicly a special envoy of the President of the U.S. (for instance, Mr. Kissinger) or the U.S. Secretary of State or even the President of the U.S. himself for direct meeting and discussions.”⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶² Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 152.

⁵⁶³ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 327.

⁵⁶⁴ Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 118, 300-301.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the absence of dialogue in US-China relations prior to rapprochement. It found that the diplomatically abnormal state of affairs was maintained as it served a practical purpose in the respective foreign policies of the two countries. Each side articulated a systemic reason in which the integration of the other was difficult to conceive, resulting in an implicit agreement that coexistence is unnecessary as well as impossible. Having assumed office in January 1969, the Nixon-administration showed a fundamental concern with the international equilibrium, and began to frame US foreign policy as ill-suited under the yoke of Wilsonianism for remedying this problem. The normative estrangement driving this criticism pitted Nixon and Kissinger as strangers against the traditional idealism and moralism informing American foreign policy. As a remedy, Kissinger relied on *European realpolitik* to express the ways in which US foreign policy needs to change *if* its primary objective has to do with the international order. The institutional estrangement from the American bureaucracy was both the cause and the effect of this normative dissatisfaction.

The un-American turn in American leadership proved to be fertile. The shift from an ideological to a non-ideological foreign policy helped conceive the necessity and possibility of change towards the PRC. The intensification of the Soviet threat and the American perception of it implied that there is a window of opportunity created by worsening relations between Moscow and Beijing. Eventually, thanks to rounds of focused messaging, unilateral and reciprocal gestures, as well as third-party mediation in Pakistan, the American and Chinese governments agreed in 1971 that a diplomatic dialogue is desirable to 'talk of differences that divide them'. This agreement was indispensable, and it set the stage for pioneering encounters between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai. Once their meetings were under way, the two diplomats needed to come to terms with each

other over two questions. If diplomatic normalization between the US and the PRC were to occur, then why and how would it happen? Their joint deliberations over these questions are the subject of the following chapter.

7. Arrival to China – Normalization in US-China Diplomatic Dialogue

7.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the first substantive diplomatic encounters between China and the US in the run-up to President Nixon's historic visit to Beijing in February 1972. Two trips made by Kissinger are in the focus of attention. The first one is the famous secret visit that lasted from 9-11 July 1971. This trip hosted the first pioneering discussions between Kissinger and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. The second trip took place from 20-26 October 1971. It was a public visit made by a larger American delegation led by Kissinger. The first trip offered an opportunity to spell out the respective positions of the two speakers, focusing on differences first and foremost. The second trip was focused on setting the stage for Nixon's trip, while also deliberating over the substance of a potential joint communique to be published in conclusion of the presidential visit. The material to be analyzed consists of the official memoranda of conversation documenting the dialogue between Kissinger and Zhou during the two trips, along with the two reports Kissinger submitted to Nixon after each visit.

This chapter puts forward three arguments. First, the challenge entailed in the conversation is interpretive in nature, and its purpose is to convince the other party. It unfolds as the interlocutors debate particular *understandings* that construe them as different as well as similar. These understandings pertain to questions over substance, over philosophical approach, over history, over the nature of the bilateral relationship, and over the purpose of dialogue itself. These understandings are forged in the *conceptualizations* by which the two speakers advance them. There is a particular dynamic to this process. One side makes an offer for why an interpretation needs to be intersubjectively accepted. The recipient side can accept the proposed understanding, or counter it with an alternative understanding. If this alternative conceptualization comes to be

accepted, then the understanding previously offered is *estranged*. The exchanges progress as the two speakers sort out meanings to be accepted as common from those that are to be left behind. These exchanges demonstrate that enactment, the last stage of diplomatic normalization, is fundamentally a *negotiation of meaning*.

Second, it is the intersubjective acceptance of the Nixon-administration *as different* than all other American administrations that forms the basic consensus between Kissinger and Zhou. This is a point of commonality resulting from Kissinger's efforts to convince Zhou of the un-Americanness of the Nixon-administration. Kissinger and Zhou converge in understanding that the *nature* of this difference lies in the *political will* of the Nixon-administration. It is its commitment to realism that renders it more *agential* in its relations with China than previous administrations. This is the primary understanding hammered out during the two trips. It is this joint conceptualization of American difference and its specific meaning that marks the normalization of US-China relations.

The third argument is that Kissinger's reports to Nixon are instrumental in imbuing the transcripts with a meaning recognizable for those uninvolved with the conversation. The imperative of writing such a report readily gives away that the conversation between Zhou and Kissinger is not inherently meaningful. In bridging the abyss between what was said in Beijing and what it means for US policy, Kissinger relies on the *lingua franca* of realpolitik. He frames the Chinese position as compatible with an American emphasis on the balance of power. This is most evident when Kissinger visibly *misinterprets* what Zhou told him in China to make it fit with the American approach. Though the reports are at times objectively inaccurate, Kissinger is engaged in mediation *par excellence*. In articulating what the trips mean, he transgresses beyond the textual evidence available of the discussions.

This chapter is structured as follows. The two trips and the corresponding reports by Kissinger are discussed in detail in chronological fashion. For both trips, this entails, first, a *textual reenactment* of the dialogue based on the transcripts of conversation, and, second, a follow-up discussion of the report Kissinger produced for Nixon. Thereafter, the two trips and the reports are discussed more generally, by reference to the analytical framework of diplomatic normalization.

7.2. *Kissinger's first (secret) trip to Beijing (9-11 July, 1971)*⁵⁶⁵

“We are not engaged in a diplomatic dialogue.”⁵⁶⁶

Zhou to Kissinger, 10 July 1971

Kissinger's July 1971 secret trip was a pioneering encounter between American and Chinese diplomats. It lasted for 3 days from 9 until 11 July, hosting substantive discussions of matters of bilateral and international concern. Kissinger's interlocutor was Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, though Kissinger refers to him in the English version of the term, as Prime Minister. The following analysis is based on the transcripts of conversation documenting 4 rounds of talks during the trip. The purpose of doing so is to map out the respective concerns voiced by the two sides, the nature and dynamic of the relationship between the two speakers, and the general difficulty entailed in inaugurating diplomatic dialogue between erstwhile enemies. It is also to identify interactions of similarity versus difference, whereby Kissinger and Zhou articulate common ground, or the lack thereof, between themselves and their respective countries.

What emanates from the transcripts of the July secret trip is the combative atmosphere that Zhou, in particular, is responsible for. The first round of talks testifies to a fundamental asymmetry between the two speakers. Zhou is primarily posing questions about US foreign policy, while Kissinger is trying to address them as best as he can. Their difference in what the crux of the matter is in bilateral relations is revealing. Zhou speaks relentlessly about equality and mutual respect, while Kissinger stresses international peace and China's potential contribution to it. Kissinger

⁵⁶⁵ Documents 139 to 143 in volume XVII of the official Foreign Relations of the United States (China, 1969-1976) reproduce in full the memoranda of conversations between American and Chinese diplomats during Kissinger's secret trip from 9 to 11 July 1971. Because page numbers are available in this volume, references in this part of the chapter are made both to document number and to page numbers. Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Documents 139-143, 359-452.

⁵⁶⁶ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 414.

invests in finding common ground, while Zhou deflates such attempts by indicting the mistakes and wrongdoings of US policy in the region.

In his opening statement, Kissinger emphasizes the *reality of the situation* bringing the two sides together:

“We are here today, brought together by global trends. Reality has brought us together, and we believe that reality will shape our future.”⁵⁶⁷

It is the recognition that China “must participate in all matters affecting the peace of Asia and the peace of the world” that informs the Nixon-administration’s opening. In this statement, *reality* is implicated in facilitating diplomatic dialogue. It becomes an external force operating through ‘global trends’ and pushing the US and China onto the road to rapprochement. Kissinger stresses, therefore, the necessity for dialogue at this particular moment in time.

In his response, Zhou emphasizes a different framing. It is the Nixon-administration’s un-American *facing up* to the problems of US foreign policy and the abnormality of its approach to China that allowed the opening to begin in the first place. Instead of necessity, he stresses the historical possibility of dialogue informed by this new American approach. In this respect, Zhou recounts having been told by the Pakistani mediator that the Americans are “coming with a frank and sincere attitude and wanted to have serious discussions with us.”⁵⁶⁸ Therefore, Zhou speaks of the specificity of the administration to the detriment of the reality of global politics in 1971. Though appreciative of the Americans’ intention, Zhou introduces a notion of difference.

⁵⁶⁷ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 361.

⁵⁶⁸ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 364.

“We welcome this attitude. We come with the same attitude, and we are ready to explain our opinions frankly. It is very clear that the world outlook and stands of our two sides are different.”⁵⁶⁹

In Zhou’s diagnosis, the possibility of rapprochement lies in the commitment by the Nixon-administration to resolve issues of fundamental significance between China and the US, on the one hand, and to relegate minor questions of secondary concern in this process, on the other. In doing so, Zhou stresses the singularity of the Nixon-administration as opposed to an earlier era when John Foster Dulles, in particular, was secretary of state. This was a time when conditions were set by the American administration that China was in no position to meet. In contrast, the Nixon-administration demonstrated its intention to find solutions to common problems. The absence of this intentionality is what explains the impotence of the Warsaw talks. As Zhou recounts (emphasis added):

“Our meetings have gone on for almost 16 years. We have met 136 times, but there’s still no result. Just as you [Kissinger] have now mentioned, it’s not so easy to bring about results through official negotiations. This is not solely because the negotiations are official, because *these today are* official; it is whether there is an intention to solve problems. This is the crux.”⁵⁷⁰

This is in opposition to the attitude professed by earlier administrations:

“At that time (1954) the U.S. Ambassador always said he would like first to settle the small questions one at a time so that we could gradually come closer. We consistently said that only the settlement of fundamental questions first could lead to the settlement of other questions.”⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 364.

⁵⁷⁰ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 365.

⁵⁷¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 365.

Kissinger accepts that the two countries are different in significant ways. There is no sense in debating the basic nature of the relationship. But precisely because the US and China are not similar, he adds, cooperation is possible only if mutual respect and equality is observed. For this to be truly respected, differences in domestic governance systems need to be subjugated to the primacy of rapprochement. Kissinger inaugurates this understanding to Zhou:

“The essential question for our relations is whether both countries are willing to let history judge who is correct, while in the interval we cooperate on matters of mutual concern on a basis of mutual respect and equality and for the benefit of all mankind.”⁵⁷²

The statement articulates an invitation for China to assume its voice in matters relating to the international equilibrium. If it is accepted, China can become *equal* to the role the US plays in global affairs. Importantly, this is not the interpretation of Zhou regarding equality or what is needed to practice it. Indeed, what Kissinger claims to be the essential question is not essential for Zhou. Kissinger stresses the irrelevance of differences in domestic socioeconomic systems, and, in doing so, he insists on a logic of interaction antithetical to the spirit of the Cold War. For Zhou, the primary issue is not US ideology or its approach to communist countries. It is its *very practical involvement in the status of Taiwan*. Therefore, Zhou submits what he thinks is the first question – essential, that is – in the following terms:

“The first question is that of equality, or in other words, the principle of reciprocity. All things must be done in a reciprocal manner.”⁵⁷³

⁵⁷² Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 361.

⁵⁷³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 364.

Equality understood as reciprocity is of a fundamentally bilateral nature. Zhou emphasizes that the “crux” of the matter,⁵⁷⁴ a rhetorical device he employs multiple times, has to do with Taiwan. It is that the US position on it changed from seeing the status of Taiwan as an internal affair to seeing it as undetermined following the outbreak of the Korean War. It is this stance that needs to be fixed for normalization to take place and for the relationship to be one of equals. In calling for this change, Zhou’s explicitness approximates a bluntness not commonly seen in diplomatic intercourse:

“Therefore, in recognizing China the U.S. must do so unreservedly. It must recognize the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China and not make any exceptions. Just as we recognize the U.S. as the sole legitimate government without considering Hawaii, the last state, an exception to your sovereignty, or still less, Long Island. Taiwan is a Chinese province, is already restored to China, and is an inalienable part of Chinese territory.”⁵⁷⁵

In the ensuing discussion, equality takes on the function of a grand signifier that accommodates two different interpretations. For Kissinger, equality is a substantive matter. It is the admission by which the American superpower allows a junior partner, the PRC, to have a say in matters of international concern *despite the fact* that its status as a communist country with insufficient material power does not warrant such a privileged position. For Zhou, equality is a symbolical matter. It is realized not by China being on par with the US as a great manager of international order, but by the US abrogating its interference in China’s sovereign territory and recognizing the Beijing government as the government of China. When Zhou appreciates the commitment by the Nixon-administration commitment to *fix problems*, he assumes that the key problem to fix is Taiwan, not the international order. When Kissinger talks of the reality of the international

⁵⁷⁴ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 366.

⁵⁷⁵ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 367.

situation and of the necessity to draw China in to help manage it, he assumes that *talking with the Chinese of such matters* is the very way to practice substantive equality. For Kissinger, the negotiations with the Chinese are evidence of a relationship of equals. For Zhou, the talks are merely the first step to repair what is a fundamentally unequal relationship.

Besides the notion of equality, the two sides clash over the state of affairs in the bilateral relationship and in the region writ large. Zhou is unleashing a litany of charges levelled at US foreign policy and its responsibility. Kissinger tends to respond in two ways. One is to historicize that which Zhou raises as a matter of contemporary concern. To the chagrin of the Beijing government, the American position is certainly that Taiwan's status is undetermined. But this is due to the Korean War, an event brought about by neither of two sides in particular. In Kissinger's admission:

“There is no question that if the Korean War hadn't occurred, a war which we [Americans] did not seek and you [Chinese] did not seek, Taiwan would probably be today a part of the PRC.”⁵⁷⁶

Similar interactions appear throughout the conversation. One of the ways by which Kissinger responds to Zhou is to escape into history:

“PM Chou:	The U.S. should be held mainly responsible for the enlargement of the war in Indochina, and there is no way to shirk that responsibility.
Dr. Kissinger:	That is history, and our problem now is how to end it.” ⁵⁷⁷

Over time, Kissinger and Zhou come to an agreement that culpability lies with earlier American administrations. This is an understanding that becomes mutually embraced and gives the

⁵⁷⁶ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 368.

⁵⁷⁷ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 382.

conversation a solid footing in commonality. For Kissinger, othering the Truman-administration and Dulles' China policy is convenient both to accept Zhou's criticism as valid, as well as to exonerate the Nixon-administration from the mistakes of the past. The other method Kissinger turns in his response to Zhou's accusations is to stress the necessity of time. Kissinger explains that though the Nixon-administration seeks to comply with Zhou's requests, the temporality of solving the problem of Taiwan needs to be considered. The following interaction is telling in this regard:

- “Dr. Kissinger: But if we want to put the relations between our two countries on a genuine basis of understanding, we must recognize each other's necessities.
- PM Chou: What necessities?
- Dr. Kissinger: We should not be forced into formal declarations in a brief period of time which by themselves have no practical effect. However, we will not stand in the way of basic evolution, once you and we have come to a basic understanding.”⁵⁷⁸

This exchange is the context in which the American emphasis on *patience* comes into the picture. Kissinger claims that the Nixon-administration readily concedes that recognizing the PRC can only be done by severing ties with Taiwan. The possibility of acting on this necessity is, however, limited as it cannot be done at once. In so arguing, Kissinger is making a distinction between changes that are necessary as well as possible, and those that are necessary but impossible right now. For instance, he separates the issue of military withdrawal, which is feasible in the short term, from what he calls ‘political evolution,’ whose direction can be set in the present by the two sides together but whose implementation is a matter of time.

⁵⁷⁸ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 369–70.

Indeed, the term ‘evolution’ is not an incidental choice in this discourse. Kissinger refers to it multiple times during the conversation. Whenever it appears, evolution is employed to indicate that once a direction has been identified and accepted, and the two sides act on such a direction, political developments in the Far East *will fall into their place on their own*. It implies that what needs to be done is to identify and set a course for the relationship, and the relationship will naturally move in the desirable direction. It is an ingenious rhetorical device. It accepts that the two sides have a choice to make at the start, but after this choice is made, the relationship will gravitate in a quasi-automatic sense towards this preconceived objective. Evolution reflects the predicament from which Kissinger is negotiating. Because what he is selling to Zhou is the promise of normalization rather than normalization itself, his success depends on creating the impression that *an understanding of normalization in the present of its future implementation* is sufficient for the relationship to proceed.⁵⁷⁹

In stressing political evolution, Kissinger goes against the urgency with which Zhou stresses diplomatic recognition as a prerequisite for the relationship to continue. Implementing the policy change Zhou demands is not possible. This Kissinger puts to Zhou in blunt terms:

“There’s no sense deluding ourselves. There’s no possibility in the next one and a half years for us to recognize the PRC as the sole government of China in a formal way.”⁵⁸⁰

On another occasion, Kissinger expresses this very idea in more philosophical terms. He frames the urgency-patience dichotomy as a matter pertaining to the very success of rapprochement. By

⁵⁷⁹ Ross draws a similar conclusion: “[T]he Nixon administration offered China the prospect of future concessions leading to normalization of relations basically on Chinese terms.” See Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, 53.

⁵⁸⁰ Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 139, 372.

doing so, Kissinger reverses responsibility and puts the onus of restraint on Zhou. That is, rapprochement may fail not if the US is too slow, but if China is too impatient:

“It is obvious that two countries which have been isolated from each other as we have for such a long period of time face a major problem in re-establishing first, normalcy, and then friendship. In this, it is necessary to be both patient and understanding with each other. We should not destroy what is possible by forcing events beyond what the circumstances will allow.”⁵⁸¹

In response, Zhou frames the urgency-patience dichotomy as meaningless. Diplomatic dialogue is impossible without diplomatic recognition. He explicitly asks how “would we be able to have exchanges” in the absence of normalization. Kissinger responds by reducing the question to the will of the leaders involved (emphasis added):

“If you, Mr. Prime Minister, and I, or even more importantly, Chairman Mao and the President, agree on a fundamental course, then *we will know what will happen* and then the only issue remaining is “when.””⁵⁸²

Zhou, however, continues to contest this principle, and not just in the abstract. He challenges the distinction between military withdrawal and political evolution. In particular, he insists that doing the first without following it up with recognition is a sheer paradox. If American troops are withdrawn from Taiwan, then what is the purpose of withholding recognition from the Beijing government? Doing the former contains in a nutshell the necessity of doing the latter, too. To this Kissinger responds by continuing his game of temporality. This time, however, his way out is to stress the simultaneity of withdrawal and political evolution. They “can start concurrently.”⁵⁸³ In doing so, Kissinger tries to convince Zhou that decisions in the present, rather than tangible steps

⁵⁸¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 410.

⁵⁸² Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 411.

⁵⁸³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 400.

in the present, are the crux of their discussion. The difference between them is still a fundamental one, as it pertains to the necessity and possibility of rapprochement. Both sides accept that rapprochement is necessary. Importantly, Zhou stresses that its necessity is meaningless if it is practically *impossible* at the same time, whereas Kissinger stresses that its necessity is meaningful *despite its practical impossibility on Chinese terms* in the present.

It is hardly questionable, therefore, that there is much disagreement in substance and in the temporality of solutions. There is an interesting exchange, however, that illustrates a basic commonality over the nature of the dialogue itself. Speaking from a position of intimacy not uncommon in Kissinger's personal approach, he says that what he is telling Zhou is "what a diplomat couldn't tell you [Zhou], if he were here."⁵⁸⁴ Based on this allusion, Zhou makes an inference to the quality of their dialogue:

“PM Chou:	We are not engaged in a diplomatic dialogue.
Dr. Kissinger:	Right...” ⁵⁸⁵

There are multiple ways to decipher this exchange. In a direct sense, Zhou's response testifies to his assumption that conducting official talks, which he admitted to in an earlier exchange, and engaging in a diplomatic dialogue are different. Zhou frames the conversation as non-diplomatic in the absence of reciprocity understood as official recognition. Speaking of a diplomatic dialogue is nonsensical as long as the US is involved in the territorial disunity of China. But because Kissinger does not contest Zhou's portrayal, there is agreement over the talks being non-diplomatic. Importantly, this admission *carries with it profoundly diplomatic effects*. It allows them to be transparent with each other, to voice concerns more bluntly than is possible in a

⁵⁸⁴ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 414.

⁵⁸⁵ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 414.

diplomatic site in which the symbolism of saying and acting exerts a disciplinary influence on its participants. They argue, ask questions, and contest each other, and, in so doing, they clash over differences while looking to identify what they may have in common. Rendering their context as an encounter *not of* diplomacy is the way this diplomatic meeting is possible.

In addition to the agreement that the meeting is not (yet) diplomatic, the two speakers invest in other points in common. The uniqueness of the Nixon-administration is one such thread in the conversation. Kissinger is explicit that the new approach to China is the consequence of Nixon's personality:

“Our policy with respect to the People's Republic of China... is related to his [Richard Nixon's] lifetime conviction that there cannot be peace without the participation of the PRC. These decisions we make on the basis of the permanent interests of the U.S. and not the personal interest of President Nixon.”⁵⁸⁶

The statement is rather paradoxical. Kissinger impresses that the turn to China has to do with Nixon the individual, which Zhou accepts in subsequent exchanges. Yet, because the whole initiative cannot be a personal fancy *only*, rapprochement has to be couched in a vocabulary of American interests. Therefore, Kissinger attempts to integrate the particular and the general in the same statement. He stresses the particularity of the administration only to undermine it by casting rapprochement in a general category of the *permanent* interests of the US. Two obvious questions emerge from the Chinese point of view. If rapprochement is a permanent interest of the US, then why did previous administrations not act accordingly? Conversely, if rapprochement is the brainchild of the Nixon-administration specifically, then how can it be a permanent American interest?

⁵⁸⁶ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 371.

Over time, it becomes evident that Kissinger invests more in the singularity of the Nixon-administration to the detriment of the generality of interest underlying rapprochement. This notion of singularity takes shape in othering the American government, in particular leaders and administrations framed as unable to make such a revolutionary move towards China:

“The only President who could conceivably do what I am discussing with you is President Nixon. Other political leaders might use more honeyed words, but would be destroyed by what is called the China lobby in the U.S. if they ever tried to move even partially in the direction which I have described to you.”⁵⁸⁷

In spelling out the particular philosophy of the Nixon-administration, Kissinger further estranges earlier administrations and relegates their practices to the past:

“In 1954, Secretary Dulles believed that it was America’s mission to fight communism all around the world and for the U.S. to be the principal force, to engage itself in every struggle at every point of the world at any point of time.”⁵⁸⁸

Because the Nixon-administration does not “deal with communism in the abstract,”⁵⁸⁹ Kissinger continues, its policy is “based on the realities of the situation of the present and not on the dreams of the past.”⁵⁹⁰ In stressing the present, however, Kissinger opens up for a charge by Zhou because he cannot commit to executing the very policy change Zhou deems to be the ‘first question’ of the relationship. Instead of dealing with the dreams of the past, then, it seems that Kissinger is forced to deal *in the dreams of the future*. In subsequent exchanges, he tries to convince Zhou that the

⁵⁸⁷ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 415.

⁵⁸⁸ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 377.

⁵⁸⁹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 377.

⁵⁹⁰ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 378.

agreement to recognize the PRC in the future by severing ties with Taiwan, not the act of recognition itself in the present, *should be the present reality* of the US-China relationship.

Despite convergence in othering the mistakes of earlier American administrations, substantive differences continue to abound. Indochina, in particular, is a subject that invites a litany of questions through which Zhou indicts American responsibility. The dialogue is downright acerbic at this point. When Kissinger interrupts Zhou, the Chinese Premier resumes his charge by saying “I have not finished.”⁵⁹¹ Zhou stresses that because of American involvement in Vietnam, the US needs to answer what happens if the civil war resumes after US forces withdraw. The interpellation is unmistakable:

“You should answer that question. Since the U.S. has sent troops for ten years, you must answer that question.”⁵⁹²

From the very beginning of the talks, Kissinger tended to be more deferential and respectful towards Zhou, an asymmetry detectable in most rounds of discussion. He addresses Zhou as Mr. Prime Minister many times, even though Zhou addresses Kissinger as ‘you,’ and very rarely uses the much more formal ‘Your excellency.’ Yet, Kissinger’s patience is wearing thin at this point:

“[W]e are not children, and history will not stop on the day a peace agreement is signed... We are not proposing a treaty to stop history.”⁵⁹³

This is arguably one of the low points of the conversation. Refusing to be spoken to as a child, Kissinger has had enough of Zhou’s insistence that the situation in Vietnam is likely to bear the blueprint of American involvement even after withdrawal. A clear sign of dissatisfaction is the

⁵⁹¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 381.

⁵⁹² Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 381.

⁵⁹³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 381.

making explicit of that which is obvious. Because the impossibility of stopping history with a treaty is hardly a controversial claim, Kissinger spelling out that this is *indeed not the intention* of the Americans is illustration of his frustration with Zhou's seeming inability to register such an obvious fact.

On another occasion, Kissinger *repeats* what he said previously with a similar effect on the dialogue. This is a rhetorical device less antagonistic than stating the obvious, but more antagonistic than the diversionary technique provided by a recourse to the past.

“PM Chou: The U.S. should withdraw from Indochina.
Dr. Kissinger: I said that the U.S. was prepared to do so.”⁵⁹⁴

Repetition is telling of a sense of disconnect in the dialogue, in which one side feels the need to repeat what has already been said. The function of repetition is not to improve understanding *per se*, but to indicate that there is no point from the perspective of one of the speakers in *relitigating* an issue that had been reassuringly settled. Repetition is the way to communicate that the exchange is a waste of time. Because repetition is uneconomical, however, the very participant repeating his position *enacts* this waste of time.

In addition to Indochina, Zhou also indicts US foreign policy over its involvement in the 1970 Cambodian coup. Kissinger stresses in multiple responses that Washington had nothing to do with it whatsoever. Though he readily accepts that the coup itself did take place, he tries to convince Zhou that the US is innocent in bringing it about. But because Zhou is relentless, Kissinger feels

⁵⁹⁴ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 384.

the need to repeat his position. His doing so is to spell out the American position across three different verbs: “We did not produce, cause, or encourage it [the Cambodian coup].”⁵⁹⁵

Zhou attacks Kissinger over Japan, too. He claims that it is “your [America’s] purpose to strengthen Japan so it can serve as your vanguard in the Far East in controlling Asian countries.”⁵⁹⁶ He also alleges that the revival of militarism in Japan is “encouraged and supported” by the US.⁵⁹⁷ These substantive concerns have to do with Washington wanting to *leave a tail behind* in the region. This is a rhetorical device Zhou employs numerous times. Zhou sees evidence to this tail in the US’s unwillingness to withdraw unconditionally and at once from Vietnam, from Taiwan, and from South Korea. It indicates that the Americans seek to keep in place an arrangement that helps them manipulate political developments from afar. The tail is an issue for China, in particular, because if Chiang Kai-shek senses the lackluster commitment by which the US is withdrawing from Taiwan, he may seek out the assistance of Japan:

“If he [Chiang Kai-shek] feels that the U.S. is unreliable, he could go to Japan, and Japan itself wants to be drawn into Taiwan and already considers Taiwan within its security sphere.”⁵⁹⁸

On the very final day of the trip, Zhou confirms that the following is China’s concern with regards to Japan:

“You will also need to undertake not to let the Japanese armed forces into Taiwan before you left.”⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁵ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 385.

⁵⁹⁶ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 390.

⁵⁹⁷ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 406.

⁵⁹⁸ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 405.

⁵⁹⁹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 446.

Just to be safe, Zhou repeats, for one last time, this key lesson to memorize. Before concluding the 3-day trip, Zhou says he hopes that Kissinger's negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris will progress. In addition, he says the following:

“PM Chou: And that you won't leave a tail behind.

Dr. Kissinger: There's no danger in misunderstanding the Prime Minister.”⁶⁰⁰

Importantly, at stake for China is not that Japan moves into the vacuum created by the US once its troops are withdrawn. It is that the US does not move out *sufficiently quickly* for the PRC to take over Taiwan immediately. Zhou does not want US troops to remain to protect against Japanese aggression. He wants them to be removed as fast as possible to prevent any window of opportunity for Japan to seize the interim. Kissinger's response in a previous interaction is apposite in this one, too. It stresses gradualism – patience, that is – along with the potentially counterproductive effects of moving too fast:

“Sometimes even correct things must be done gradually, because if done too quickly they have a shocking impact and create an opposite effect from what one intends.”⁶⁰¹

The dialogue continues but remains strained. Kissinger stresses the limitations on the possibility of action, whereas Zhou stresses the necessity of doing things at once as the only way forward. Kissinger seeks to articulate common ground. His doing so in the following exchange is not to nurture the uniqueness of the Nixon-administration but to invest in the strangeness of American society. The following is a key exchange:

“Dr. Kissinger: The U.S. is a complex nation for outsiders to understand because at one and the same time it's extremely materialistic

⁶⁰⁰ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 449.

⁶⁰¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 390.

and extremely idealistic – and by Marxist standards, naively idealistic. I believe it's quite possible, Mr. Prime Minister, that at the end of World War II Chairman Mao could have understood the tendencies in American policy better than American leaders themselves.

PM Chou: You are right. There's a saying in China that those on the sidelines often are more clear about issues than those directly involved."⁶⁰²

The admission of American society as complex introduces a distance by way of estrangement between Kissinger and his home country. The emphasis on America being extremely, *naively*, idealistic is recognition of the vulnerability and weakness of its society. In saying so, Kissinger symbolically moves across the aisle of the negotiating table. His criticism is articulated *as if* its perspective is the Chinese rather than the American. He also implicates Mao in the discussion as someone familiar with America, a move slightly paradoxical in this context. If the US is naively idealistic by Marxist standards, then what can Mao – the preeminent Chinese Marxist – possibly understand about it? Importantly, Mao would have understood the *consequences* of the post-WWII tendencies in American policy. The agreement Kissinger imagines is between Kissinger himself and Mao with regards to their common *criticism of America*. Mao could have concluded after 1945 that which Kissinger concluded only retrospectively: that reliance on the inherent idealism of American society makes for bad foreign policy.

This theme – the intersubjective comprehensibility of America *as strange* – returns in other exchanges. Besides the commonality it establishes between Kissinger and Zhou, it also allows Kissinger to rescue American agency. This is evident when Kissinger articulates that the mistakes

⁶⁰² Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 391–92.

Zhou identified in US policy are *not really* what the Americans wanted. Indeed, the very hegemony America came to enjoy happened *despite* Americans not wanting it:

“So a curious thing occurred, Mr. Prime Minister. We didn’t look for hegemony as we spread across the world; this was an undesirable consequence and led us into many enormous difficulties.”⁶⁰³

Stripping the US of its agency is a logical response because Kissinger is on the back foot. This is a corner to which Kissinger is forced by virtue of Zhou’s criticism of American policy. That is, how can the US be held responsible if what *befall it* was not of its own doing? But the statement is not simply an exoneration from responsibility. It also implies that developments across the world happened *in the opposite direction* of what the American leadership had in mind. Therefore, the statement is another reference, implicit but clear, to the uniqueness of the Nixon-administration. Armed with an un-American proactivity compared with the passivity of earlier administrations, the message is that the Nixon-administration will not be *outmaneuvered* in its global undertakings. Zhou can rest assured that change does not *happen to* the Nixon-Kissinger leadership. Rather, change is made and enacted by it.

Curiously, exchanges over the Soviet Union cement differences rather than commonalities. Against the American impression that the Soviet threat is what informs China’s interest in rapprochement, there is little evidence in the transcripts that this is indeed the major concern. Throughout the 3-day visit, Zhou consistently puts both the Soviet Union and the US in the same superpower category. Kissinger is explicit that the approach bringing him to Beijing is that the

“U.S. should intervene primarily when a super-power threatens to establish hegemony over countries which can be strong to resist on their own.”⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 392.

⁶⁰⁴ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 393.

Zhou claims in response that there is a difference in the two positions. He introduces a term specific to his discourse, like leaving a tail behind. He charges that both superpowers' hands *are being stretched* too far out. This device is meant to insist on the difference between China, on the one hand, and Moscow and Washington, on the other. The former is driven by ambitions unlike those that make the US and the USSR two of the same kind. Zhou speaks of this basic difference on multiple occasions:

“It [Soviet Union] will also be defeated as it stretches out its hand so far. You [Americans] are feeling difficulties now, and they [Soviets] too will also feel difficulties. They are just following after you.”⁶⁰⁵

“The question of India is a question in which you two big powers, the U.S. and the USSR, are taking a hand in.”⁶⁰⁶

“The Soviet Union is following your suit, in stretching its hands all over the world.”⁶⁰⁷

This explains why a major concern in Zhou's discourse is not the Soviet threat, but superpower collusion against China. Given the historical record of Western countries carving up China into spheres of interest, Zhou paints the picture of a similar possibility:

“You could unite, with the USSR occupying all areas north of the Yellow River, and you occupying all the areas south of the Yangtse River, and the eastern section between these two rivers could be left to Japan.”⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁵ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 393.

⁶⁰⁶ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 401.

⁶⁰⁷ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 405.

⁶⁰⁸ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 403.

Though this is a substantive worry for Zhou, the two interlocutors find common ground in their disdain for the bureaucracy. This is a commonality fed by both parties throughout the conversation.

At the start, it is Kissinger introducing the theme:

- “Dr. Kissinger: The President asked that this mission be secret until after we meet, so we can meet unencumbered by bureaucracy, free of the past, and with the greatest possible latitude.
- PM Chou: You don’t like bureaucracy either.
- Dr. Kissinger: Yes, and it’s mutual; the bureaucracy doesn’t like me.”⁶⁰⁹

In subsequent exchanges, the imperative for secrecy is confirmed. In practice, it is associated with *honesty*. It allows the speakers to speak their minds with the ‘greatest possible latitude.’ Knowing that their encounter and its substance is shielded from exposure, both are willing to reveal concerns specific to each party and to discuss them in a straightforward fashion. The metaphorical rejection of the bureaucracy generates, therefore, a paradoxical effect. Like the non-diplomatic quality of the meeting leading to a more critical, and thus diplomatic, engagement, the secrecy in which the meeting is shrouded informs the *transparency* of the exchanges. In this context, transparency is the possibility of discussing what needs to be settled for rapprochement to work. Transparency of the bureaucratic-administrative kind stifle this substantive transparency.

Indeed, bureaucracy becomes such a common enemy that after Zhou reveals to Kissinger how the Cultural Revolution helped purge the Chinese bureaucracy from its malicious elements, Kissinger could not help but refer back to it *approvingly*. In light of the disastrous consequences of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese society and economy, it stretches the imagination that an American diplomat could have made the following comment:

⁶⁰⁹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 139, 361.

“We have not had the benefits of the Cultural Revolution which the Prime Minister described at lunch time. So we have a large, somewhat undisciplined, and with respect to publicity, not always reliable bureaucracy.”⁶¹⁰

At the end, the trip concludes with Kissinger praising his Chinese hosts, but Zhou’s enthusiasm is far from matching that of his guest. Kissinger stresses the “historic work” the two of them did, to which Zhou responds that they have “gone the first step.”⁶¹¹ Kissinger expresses how moved he is by the “idealism and spiritual qualities of yourself [Zhou] and your colleagues,”⁶¹² to which Zhou reacts by simply suggesting that they have a quick lunch. He also repeats the charge that runs through the conversation:

“We don’t want to spread our hands all over the world. You and the Soviet Union have learned that lesson, and we don’t want to follow in your paths.”⁶¹³

Kissinger’s invitation for China to have a voice in matters relating to international peace does not fall on deaf ears. Zhou understands it, but he interprets it as enlisting China in a superpower competition it is uncomfortable with. His resistance is informed by the paths trodden by the two superpowers, both of them converging in the Chinese perspective in an overt ambition to global hegemony. For Kissinger, bilateral cooperation consists in managing the international order together. For Zhou, this is unacceptable and impossible as long as it requires China to socialize into a superpower practice diametrically opposed to China’s self-identity.

⁶¹⁰ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 424.

⁶¹¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 451.

⁶¹² Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 452.

⁶¹³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 452.

Differences complicated the drafting of the announcement, too, of President Nixon's future visit to China. Two issues are particularly noteworthy. The first is that the Chinese were adamant that it was Nixon who wanted to visit China, and that the Chinese invitation came in response to the president's desire. Kissinger pushed back against this interpretation, settling on a phrasing that there is a "mutually expressed desire for a summit."⁶¹⁴ The second issue had to do with the purpose of the meeting. Reflecting the substantive debate between Kissinger and Zhou, the Chinese side wanted to limit the objective of the summit to seeking the normalization of relations. Kissinger pushed back. He preferred to add the phrase "peace in the world" to the text, but because of resistance from the Chinese, the objective of the meeting ended up being, in addition to seeking a normalization of relations, "also to exchange views on questions of concern to the two sides."⁶¹⁵

⁶¹⁴ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 142, 438.

⁶¹⁵ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 142, 438.

7.3. Kissinger's report to Nixon of the July trip to Beijing

The 27-page memorandum Kissinger compiled to Nixon is a key document of his experience during his secret trip to Beijing in July 1971.⁶¹⁶ It is a detailed *personal* account of the conversations he conducted with Chinese policymakers and the topics they had covered. It is telling of the (non-)significance American historiography attributes to this document that volume XVII of the official Foreign Relations of the United States (1969-1972) reproduces it in a truncated form. The “23-page narrative review” is edited out for the sake of presenting Kissinger’s introduction and conclusion only.⁶¹⁷ This is regrettable because the account testifies to the *social richness* of Kissinger’s experience. By Kissinger’s own admission, the trip left an “indelible impression” on him and his fellow Americans.⁶¹⁸ The following analysis is meant for two purposes. The first is to contrast and compare the report with the transcripts discussed above, with an eye for identifying the role *realpolitik* plays in Kissinger’s account. The second is to reconstruct Kissinger’s sense of what China is through a portrayal of who its leaders are. It is argued that the report of the July trip is a pioneering statement in American diplomatic discourse that establishes a key similarity between China and the US. The technique of doing so is for Kissinger to invest in the Chinese other that which he claims to be alien to the American self: *realpolitik*.

Juxtaposing the transcript of conversation with the report Kissinger produced of it is a way to retrace his sense-making exercise of the trip and the experience. It is also a way to reveal the

⁶¹⁶ Kissinger’s 27-page memorandum to Nixon dated 14 July 1971 is available in full as ‘Document 40’ on the National Security Archive website at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-40.pdf>. Instead of referencing the truncated, 3-page version of vol. XVII of the Foreign Relations of the United States, page numbers are referenced to the digital version of the report in the following format: ‘Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 14 July, 1971.’ Washington, October 20, 1969.

⁶¹⁷ Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 144, 453–55.

⁶¹⁸ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 26.

numerous misinterpretations through which Kissinger – unknowingly or intentionally – *fits* the meaning of the trip to the American interest. Indeed, there are sentences in the account that seem to fly in the face of the encounter if it is made sense of based on the transcript only. Of course, Kissinger stresses “the intangibles” as key in his interactions with the Chinese.⁶¹⁹ Because nuances played a central role in the experience, the textual evidence provided by the transcript cannot contain the meaning of the trip in an exhaustive fashion. Be that as it may, Kissinger is focused in his account on the substantive discussions he conducted with Zhou. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to expect that his claims in the report to the American President are *borne out* by the memorandum. The following examples are briefly discussed to demonstrate that this is not always the case.

The account presents Zhou as personalizing the “philosophical contradiction” particular to the Chinese leaders. This contradiction has to do with the “deep conflict between ideological and practical considerations of the Chinese side,”⁶²⁰ of talking with an American diplomat despite him representing China’s primary ideological foe. It is unclear based on the transcript how and why Kissinger could have reached this inference. The notion of contradiction does come up explicitly, but it appears in Zhou’s discourse when he points out the logical fallacy of separating what can be done in the present and what can be done in the future. Zhou told Kissinger there is no way to proceed with dialogue if the US is unwilling to recognize the Beijing government at once, irrespective of a statement of intention to do so at a later point. That is, US foreign policy is *itself the contradiction*, with Kissinger speaking of the need for substantive cooperation with China despite it being diplomatically unrecognized by the US. Kissinger reports to Nixon that Zhou

⁶¹⁹ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 1.

⁶²⁰ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 10.

exemplified the ‘inner brooding’ of the Chinese people, but this is a leap of faith if the transcript is an accurate rendition of what transpired between the two speakers. Zhou is more consistent about what has to fall in place in American behavior to match with the American discourse of rapprochement.

Kissinger also claims in the report that the Chinese “are deeply worried about the Soviet threat to their national integrity, realistically speaking,” adding that “they see in us [Americans] a balancing force against the USSR.”⁶²¹ Nowhere in the transcripts does Zhou mention, articulate, or otherwise imply that this is the case. Zhou is unswerving that the US and the USSR belong to the same category of superpowers bent on hegemony. Indeed, it is in clear opposition to them that he stresses China’s unwillingness to join in their ranks. Zhou does refer to the neighbor to the north at one point, and the building of air raid shelters across China, but he does not specify that the latter is against the threat posed by the former. Kissinger himself senses that this is a game played by the Chinese Premier, merely noting in response that “[y]ou [Zhou] wouldn’t tell me whom they [air raid shelters] are against.”⁶²² Rather than revealing the Soviet Union as the source of the danger, Zhou puts it bluntly that what China fears is to be “carved up again” through superpower collusion.⁶²³ He specifies the US, the USSR, and Japan as participants in such a hypothetical enterprise. Zhou’s submissions to Kissinger do not confirm that the Chinese leadership is particularly worried about the USSR.

The recourse to balancing appears in the example of Japan, too. Like in the case of the Soviet Union, Kissinger claims in the report that Zhou

⁶²¹ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 10.

⁶²² Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 140, 403.

⁶²³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 140, 403.

“understands the restraining role which we play with respect to the Japanese. This came through toward the end of our meetings, when he asked that we see to it that, as US troops are withdrawn from Taiwan, Japanese troops are not moved in to replace them. I said that this would be done.”⁶²⁴

This is a mind-boggling interpretation. Zhou does nothing but stress repeatedly the need for the US to remove troops from the region *at once and without any condition (tail) left behind*. This is the end of the meeting Kissinger refers to in the report, at which point Zhou says the following:

“[I]t would be best for you to withdraw all foreign troops from the Far East, including South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indochina. There is no need to discuss Taiwan anymore. I put this forward as a principle; this [military withdrawal from Taiwan] would be a popular move.”⁶²⁵

Further down the conversation, Zhou was unambiguous when Kissinger raised the possible role the US can play in balancing against Japan. Kissinger does so implicitly, but the attempt to *inflate* the Japanese threat for the Chinese Premier is unmistakable:

“Dr. Kissinger:	As I have said, the danger from Japan of which you speak does not come from us, and withdrawal of our forces from Japan may increase the danger that worries you.
PM Chou:	You know we are not afraid of that, as I told you yesterday. No matter how large Japan grows it has had experience with us. If they want to create great trouble, let them come.” ⁶²⁶

In this exchange as in previous ones, it is Kissinger *seeking to impress* upon Zhou that the American military profile in the region is not antithetical to China’s interests. It is Kissinger trying to mold Zhou’s perspective by persuading him that US troops can work to the advantage of the Beijing government in restraining China’s regional opponents. Once more, the necessity of such

⁶²⁴ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 17.

⁶²⁵ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 450.

⁶²⁶ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 143, 450.

attempts is rooted in the predicament from which Kissinger is negotiating. He cannot comply with Zhou's demand for a timely and unconditional withdrawal of American troops. Therefore, the American talk about normalization is unlikely to be borne out in American behavior from the Chinese perspective. The fallback strategy for Kissinger is to *explain* why it is reasonable for China to appraise in a different light that which remains the same in reality. The recourse to balancing is meant to serve this function.

The reference to balancing disguises Kissinger's preference for making sense of his exchanges through the lens of *realpolitik*. But *realpolitik* is not simply a conduit, a channel through which the convergence between American and Chinese positions are expressed. It is the very *substance* Kissinger invests in the Chinese other. It is the inauguration of this similarity between the American self and the Chinese other that makes the report an outstanding piece of American diplomatic discourse. In what follows, the establishment of this similarity is analyzed.

Kissinger begins his account by stressing the singularity of the experience in China. The visit "resulted in the most searching, sweeping and significant discussions I have ever had in government."⁶²⁷ This impression had to do with Kissinger's encounter with the Chinese leaders, who were "tough, idealistic, fanatical, single-minded and remarkable people."⁶²⁸ The adjectives deployed were meant to grasp two qualities Kissinger identified in particular, "their inward philosophical tension and their inward strength."⁶²⁹ The Chinese were "men in some anguish," suffering from "moral ambivalence," and "acting out a drama of philosophic contradictions."⁶³⁰ Indeed, for the US the opening to China was *only* "a major turn in international relations." For

⁶²⁷ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 1.

⁶²⁸ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 1.

⁶²⁹ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 6.

⁶³⁰ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 6.

China, “it is no less than a personal, intellectual, and emotional drama.”⁶³¹ The source of this inward tension was not simply the grandiosity of hosting American diplomats on Chinese soil. Rather, it had to do with engaging in a diplomatic practice *in opposition to their ideological convictions*. In Kissinger’s words:

“They have endured fifty years of the Long March, struggle against the Japanese and Kuomintang, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. Yet here they were, dealing with arch capitalists.”⁶³²

It is the second quality, their inward strength, that explains their endurance in a historical setting fraught with such contradictions. While the Chinese were living through a crisis of identity, they testified to the perseverance necessary to pull through. Indeed, it was their long history of suffering that infused them with the wherewithal to survive these transformations. It gave them an “inner confidence,” which was “reflected in a certain largeness of spirit.”⁶³³ Men of “deep conviction,” the Chinese “dealt in historical terms.”⁶³⁴ The portrayal also relied on othering the practices Kissinger claimed were particular to Soviet diplomats. The Chinese were “relaxed and cordial, matter-of-factly.”⁶³⁵ With the Soviets, such an atmosphere is claimed to have been engineered “out of instructions to be cordial.”⁶³⁶ The Chinese were also “at ease without any of the self-conscious sense of hierarchy of Soviet officials.”⁶³⁷

The two qualities Kissinger emphasized are two sides of the same interpretation. In short, the Chinese leaders are *estranged* from their own ideology, and this estrangement explains their

⁶³¹ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 6.

⁶³² Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 6.

⁶³³ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 6.

⁶³⁴ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 6.

⁶³⁵ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 2.

⁶³⁶ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 2.

⁶³⁷ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 2.

inward tension. Their interest in rapprochement is, however, evidence of their inward strength *to persevere* in this difficult situation. This strength was informed by ideological rigidity, but only in *form rather than substance*. Kissinger emphasized that the Chinese were “extremely tough on substance and ideological in their approach.”⁶³⁸ To be ideological in approach is to adopt a firm stance as a method of negotiation. To be tough on substance is to be committed to seeing through what needs to be done in the historical moment. In other words, the rigidity of China’s leaders testified to a firmness akin to an ideological position, but their substantive commitment was itself free of ideological considerations. The ‘deep conviction’ Kissinger claims to have witnessed was not, therefore, a reference to socialism. It disguised the fanaticism of the Chinese leaders with *the national interest*. Later on, this understanding became a key artefact in subsequent expressions about who China’s leaders are. For Kissinger, it remained anchored to his interpretation that the „Chinese did not believe in any ideology; they believed primarily in China.”⁶³⁹

The 27-page account pays special attention to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. He is someone who “epitomized the qualities” Kissinger distilled from his experience of the Chinese people.⁶⁴⁰ Kissinger spent most of his time in Beijing talking and interacting with Zhou. The two were engaged in negotiations from the beginning of the trip to its very end, working over the announcement that US President Richard Nixon is expected to visit China in 1972. It is not unreasonable, therefore, that Kissinger is focused in his account on reproducing the sense he had of the Chinese Premier. In Kissinger’s portrayal, Zhou

⁶³⁸ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 1.

⁶³⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1052.

⁶⁴⁰ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

“[S]poke with an almost matter of fact clarity and eloquence. He was equally at home in philosophic sweeps, historical analysis, tactical probing, light repartee.”⁶⁴¹

Zhou was also genial, urbane, and considerate. He had a sense of humor, a remarkable command of facts. Little motion was wasted “either in his words or his movements.”⁶⁴² All of this testified, Kissinger claimed, to the “brooding inner tension of a man concerned with the revolutionary fire of the next generation and the massive daily problem of caring for 750 million people.”⁶⁴³ The juxtaposition of ideology (revolutionary fire) and more down-to-earth considerations (caring for the population) becomes a rhetorical device Kissinger habitually deploys in making sense of the Chinese leaders. Ideology is the source both of the inner contradiction facing Zhou, and of the very tenacity he exhibits in his commitment to China.

Kissinger concluded that Zhou Enlai “ranks with Charles de Gaulle as the most impressive foreign statesman I have ever met.”⁶⁴⁴ Kissinger stressed the *origins* of these characteristics putting them in the same category (emphasis added): “Almost all of the positive qualities we saw are Chinese, *not communist*, and can be found in Taiwan or Singapore or San Francisco.”⁶⁴⁵ This is not simply a claim that relegates, yet again, the role of communism to fueling the inner perseverance of the Chinese leaders. It is also a way for the authoritative American self *to further estrange communism on behalf of the Chinese other*. If the qualities lauded by Kissinger in the Chinese leaders can be found anywhere, then this geographical extension functions as a normative metaphor in disguise. Because the Chinese leaders “understand big conceptions,”⁶⁴⁶ they are also able to appreciate the

⁶⁴¹ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

⁶⁴² Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

⁶⁴³ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

⁶⁴⁴ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

⁶⁴⁵ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

⁶⁴⁶ Memorandum to Nixon, 14 July, 1971, 7.

enterprise ambitioned by the Nixon-administration. Kissinger construed, therefore, a basic commonality between American self and Chinese other. His technique of doing so was to *expropriate* the perspective of the Chinese other, and to purge its identity from its traditional anchoring to ideology. The result was a rudimentary normative space in common between the American self *as estranged from its own ideology* (Wilsonianism) and the Chinese other. It was to further deepen this space that provided the American impetus for progressing with rapprochement. The sense-making process in Kissinger's account is a pioneering articulation in American discourse in which China's ideology is subjugated to its prioritization of the national interest in the early 1970s. The personal impression in Kissinger that the relationship between ideology and national interest is *finally reversed* in Chinese diplomatic practice is a key development. It is taken as evidence of the much-needed change the US had been seeking for in China's behavior. This transition was identified through Kissinger's implicit anthropomorphization of China. He projected that China is practically *the same as* the Chinese leaders acting on behalf of it. What China stood for as a collective political actor was readily contained in the qualities Kissinger reproduced in his constructions of Zhou and Mao.

Zhou, in particular, came to symbolize the Chinese other in whose essence the commitment to rapprochement was invested. Kissinger's fascination with him grew in proportion with his conviction of the rationality of rapprochement. Kissinger's recollections produce an impression that he "encountered no more compelling figure than Zhou Enlai."⁶⁴⁷ He perceived him to be a diplomat of the highest caliber, and was "utterly captivated and enthralled" by Zhou from the very

⁶⁴⁷ Quoted in Tracy B. Strong, "Reflections on Kissinger's On China," *Theory & Event*, Project MUSE, 15, no. 3 (2012): 4.

start.⁶⁴⁸ Indeed, his descriptions of encountering the Chinese leaders testify to an aura of *strategic romanticism*. They make it seem like Kissinger had found in Mao and Zhou partners armed with the same philosophical depth and strategic wisdom that Kissinger claimed to have been the hallmark of the Nixon-administration. The *perception of such* a coincidence was key. It increased the chances that a fundamental recalibration of the international order is possible with the participation of the Chinese leaders. This was confirmation that the very purpose that helped conceive rapprochement as a meaningful endeavor was, indeed, meaningful.

For Kissinger *the emotional statesman*,⁶⁴⁹ personal relations were the primary vehicles through which the wheels of diplomacy were greased. But much of his praise for Zhou, however, was rooted in Kissinger's conviction that Zhou professed qualities that made him *like Kissinger* in many respects. Zhou was turned into a mirror image in Kissinger's discourse. He refracted self-understandings that Kissinger claimed to be definitive of his very own identity. This meant that the picture made up of his adulation of the Chinese Premier was *autobiographical*. Kissinger was adamant that Zhou possessed "an intuitive grasp of the classical European balance of power."⁶⁵⁰ The Chinese leaders were the "shrewdest analysts of international affairs." Their strategic thinking was "in the great classical tradition of European statesmanship." Indeed, Isaacson noted that Kissinger's description of Zhou "also fit himself,"⁶⁵¹ meaning Kissinger. Reflecting on his first encounter with Zhou, Kissinger said it unfolded like a "dialogue between two professors of political philosophy."⁶⁵² In these fundamental respects, the Chinese leaders were, therefore, *no*

⁶⁴⁸ James Mann writes that Kissinger was "utterly captivated and enthralled by Chou Enlai" from the very beginning. Mann, *About Face*, 32.

⁶⁴⁹ Barbara Keys, "Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesman," *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 4 (September 2011): 587–609, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.00968.x>.

⁶⁵⁰ Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, 3.

⁶⁵¹ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 344.

⁶⁵² Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 344–45.

different from Kissinger. Such constructions dislocated the erstwhile substance of Chinese identity, and replaced it with a commitment to *realpolitik* as its new essence. Kissinger abrogated to himself that he is singularly positioned to express this new Chinese identity.

The drawing closer of the American self and the Chinese other did not, however, work by *formatting China in the image of the US*. The substance of the new Chinese other was expressed not as the substance of the *default* American self. In Kissinger's discourse, what the Chinese leaders had was precisely that which the Americans *did not have*. Zhou, for instance, came off as able to appreciate American foreign policy *better* than the Americans themselves. In a telling example, Kissinger noted how

“Chou En-lai had understood us. He had even grasped by early 1970 what so many domestic critics had failed to acknowledge: that we were on the way out of Vietnam.”⁶⁵³

Kissinger construed China not simply as unlike the US. The former was normatively preferable to the latter. In a White House briefing on 19 July 1971, Kissinger provided a sense of his secret trip to China and informed members of the cabinet that need to be involved. He proclaimed in no unambiguous terms that

“[o]f all the people I have talked with, they [the Chinese leaders] are the easiest to whom to say, “this is our position and these are our interests.” They understand this language.”⁶⁵⁴

Kissinger found, therefore, a basic familiarity to rely on in China. Not only did “Wilsonianism have “few disciples” in China,⁶⁵⁵ considerations of national interest superseded differences that

⁶⁵³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 689.

⁶⁵⁴ Briefing of the White House Staff on the July 15 Announcement of the President's Trip to Peking, July 19, 1971, 6. Available in full as Document 41 at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-41.pdf>.

⁶⁵⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 826.

separated China from the US. These differences did not evaporate, but they were subjugated to more immediate concerns recognized by both parties speaking the same language. The normative closeness nurtured in these constructions informed the well-known criticism Kissinger levelled against America. Estranged from his adopted home, Kissinger framed the American public as “profoundly uncomfortable with the notion of the balance of power.”⁶⁵⁶ China expressed, therefore, what the US *could become* if it follows in footsteps of the Chinese leaders and sheds its ideological commitment to Wilsonianism. Assisting in this process was a role for no other than Kissinger. His explicit ambition was, in the words of Del Pero, to “finally teach naïve and immature America the timeless (and indeed European) rules and practices of international politics.”⁶⁵⁷ In China, Kissinger found the exact template to illustrate what this new America should look like in practice.

The ultimate demonstration of the American leaders investing themselves in China came on 19 July 1971. After Nixon announced on 15 July to the American public of his planned visit to China in 1972, he gave a set of instructions for Kissinger to use in his talks with the domestic press. In particular, the memorandum stressed to need to portray Nixon as

“uniquely prepared for this meeting and how ironically in many ways he [Nixon] has similar character characteristics [sic] and background to Chou.”⁶⁵⁸

The items Nixon suggested were the alleged qualities Nixon boasted of having himself, on the one hand, and those that Kissinger claims to have witnessed in his interactions with Zhou, on the other.⁶⁵⁹ Indeed, the document is explicit on making this comparison. Kissinger was asked to “point

⁶⁵⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 50.

⁶⁵⁷ Del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist*, 6.

⁶⁵⁸ Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 147, 459.

⁶⁵⁹ These characteristics were: (1) Strong convictions. (2) Came up through adversity. (3) At his best in a crisis. Cool. Unflappable. (4) A tough bold strong leader. Willing to take chances where necessary. (5) A man who takes the long view, never being concerned about tomorrow’s headlines but about how the policy will look years from

out that most of these attributes are ones that you [Kissinger] also saw in Chou En-Lai.”⁶⁶⁰ Doing so in a subtle way required an exposition of Zhou Enlai first, to be followed by going into “how RN’s personal characteristics are somewhat similar.”⁶⁶¹ The objective was for the American president to be seen *like* the Chinese premier. Importantly, the request came after Kissinger’s July trip but before Nixon’s historic visit to China in February 1972. Kissinger duly complied with the request, and painted the following dual portrait to Life magazine (emphasis added):

“Kissinger found many similarities between the Chinese premier and the President. Chou spoke softly, like Nixon. He did not nitpick, a diplomatic device that Nixon scorns too. Chou expounded his ideology with fervor, but it never overwhelmed realism. Nixon does the same. Chou did not have to use a note in 20 hours of conversation. That’s the way Nixon talks. *The man in Peking and the man in Washington are infinitely far apart on issues and goals, but in a curious way they will not meet as strangers.*”⁶⁶²

now. (6) A man with a philosophical turn of mind. (7) A man who works without notes—in meetings with 73 heads of state and heads of government RN has had hours of conversation without any notes. When he met with Khrushchev in 1959 in the seven hour luncheon at the dacha, neither he nor Khrushchev had a note and yet discussed matters of the greatest consequences in covering many areas. (8) A man who knows Asia and has made a particular point of traveling in Asia and studying Asia. (9) A man who in terms of his personal style is very strong and very tough where necessary—steely but who is subtle and appears almost gentle. The tougher his position usually, the lower his voice. See the memorandum in full in Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 147, 459–60.

⁶⁶⁰ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 147, 459–60.

⁶⁶¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 147, 460.

⁶⁶² *Life Magazine* 71, no. 5 (July 30, 1971): 6; Also quoted in Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 351.

7.4. Kissinger's second (public) trip to Beijing (20-26 October 1971)⁶⁶³

“What is it really that we are trying to do here?”⁶⁶⁴
Kissinger to Zhou, 26 October 1971

Kissinger's second trip to Beijing is for the purpose of discussing matters pertaining to Nixon's visit in February 1972, and to begin drafting a joint communiqué to be issued by the American and Chinese leaders. Much like in July, the dialogue is between Kissinger and Zhou. Many of the themes identified previously reappear in this round, but there are new topics, too. In engaging each other, the two speakers redefine, reinterpret earlier positions, and continue to navigate the discussion by sorting out differences and similarities. In doing so, they accept particular interpretations all the while estranging others. In what follows, the memoranda of conversation documenting this dialogue are discussed in detail.

Kissinger made an attempt in July to explain to Zhou what the US can and cannot do in the present with regards to diplomatic normalization. His commitment in October remains the same, but there is a further refinement in the American position:

“I [Kissinger] think we must sort out those questions which can be solved immediately, those which can be agreed in principle but take time to implement, and those that must be left to longer processes.”⁶⁶⁵

Instead of separating doing something in the present and doing something else in the future, Kissinger introduces a third category – that which must be left to longer processes. This is

⁶⁶³ Documents 39 to 55 in volume E-13 of the official Foreign Relations of the United States (Documents on China, 1969-1972) reproduce in full the memoranda of conversations between American and Chinese diplomats during Kissinger's public trip from 20 to 26 October 1971. Because page numbers are unavailable in this volume, references in this part of the chapter are made to document number only. Steven E. Phillips, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume E-13, Documents on China, 1969-1972*, vol. E-13 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2006), 13.

⁶⁶⁴ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 55.

⁶⁶⁵ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 36.

evocative of his suggestion during the July trip that certain problems ‘will take care of themselves.’ Belonging to this category are issues whose resolution does not warrant American and Chinese agency. In contrast, issues in the first two categories require the two sides’ attention, and they are also more intertwined. Indeed, what Kissinger will stress relentlessly throughout the visit is that solving problems immediately and agreeing in principle to doing something later are *practically the same*.

As in July, it is intersubjectively accepted that there are profound differences between the two parties. What Kissinger tries to impress upon Zhou in October is that they have a historic opportunity to *do something* about those differences. The way such a choice can be made is by reliance on a conceptualization. The need for conjecture is explicit in the following statements:

“I [Kissinger] am a great believer in setting an objective first and then working out the details in relationship to that objective.”⁶⁶⁶

“I must also tell the Prime Minister in candor that what we can do depends importantly on where we think we are going.”⁶⁶⁷

Because Kissinger established in July that the US cannot be expected to implement the policy changes Zhou demands, the two sides begin to discuss what the US can say and what it can do. This becomes an interesting thread. With regards to the communiqué, Kissinger says the following:

“We have prepared some suggestions of what might conceivably be said [in the communiqué], but as I told the Prime Minister last time, we can agree to more than we can say.”⁶⁶⁸

“With respect to Taiwan, I [Kissinger] think we understand that it’s possible to do more than we can say.”⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁶ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

⁶⁶⁷ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

⁶⁶⁸ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 36.

⁶⁶⁹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

When Zhou presses whether the US still considers Taiwan's status to be undetermined, this is Kissinger's response: "Let me separate what we can say and what our policy."⁶⁷⁰ How are these statements to be understood? To begin with, it is clear that Kissinger establishes a distinction between acting (behavior) and speaking (speech). In a direct sense, Kissinger articulates the impossibility of normalizing relations officially, that is, for the American government to pronounce publicly its recognition of the PRC. Importantly, the emphasis that the US can *do and agree to more than it can say* means that its public inability to extend recognition is *not what matters*. Normalization can be acted upon by the administration, even if this understanding cannot be articulated in official discourse. Kissinger is explicit that this problem is most serious with regards to Taiwan: "How this [that the US does not maintain that the status of Taiwan is undetermined] can be expressed is a difficult matter."⁶⁷¹ Because the difficulty appears to be insurmountable, Kissinger deflects attention from the question of *official* American policy.

In a less immediate sense, the statements imply a difference not just between saying and acting, but in *saying publicly versus saying privately*, as well as between *acting publicly versus acting privately*. In saying and doing something privately, the agency of the Nixon-administration is immensely amplified. In saying and doing something publicly, its agency is severely limited. What Kissinger impresses is that private speech and behavior is always superior to public speech and behavior. Therefore, the suggestions for Zhou on how to make sense of what the US says and does can be summarized in the following way. 'Watch for the Nixon-administration's private behavior, not for its speech as a collective American agent. Conversely, watch for the Nixon-administration's private speech, not for its behavior as a collective agent.' This is most explicit when Kissinger

⁶⁷⁰ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

⁶⁷¹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

spells out what the American policy is. When Zhou asks why the US is unable to speak publicly what Kissinger says privately, this is the response (emphasis added):

“We have the problem of what I told the Prime Minister. *What I have said to him is our policy on which he can rely*, no matter what the communique says.”⁶⁷²

This solution is necessary because of the position from which Kissinger negotiates, but it becomes a problem that needs to be addressed in subsequent exchanges. Letting go of Taiwan, as Kissinger says, is “a somewhat painful process... it is not easy for us to make the changes which we have outlined for you.”⁶⁷³ But if the private meaning Kissinger establishes with Zhou is all that matters, then in what sense is normalization anything other than a gentleman’s agreement, without any *actual* change in public speech and American foreign policy behavior? If it is no more than an intersubjective hypothesis about a future state of affairs between China and the US, then to say that normalization is under way is hardly reflective of reality. The message Kissinger is telling Zhou is to proceed by taking for granted that Washington means business, even though there is little practical evidence that this is indeed the case.

Much disagreement remains over substantive questions. The meaning of US troops in Taiwan and South Korea is hotly debated. Zhou’s concern continues to be the US’ tacit support for the Japanese to move into these territories. This is explicit when Zhou asks Kissinger to confirm the following:

“Could these three points just now mentioned by you, are they to be affirmed – that is, at a time when U.S. troops are in South Korea, at a time before they have withdrawn or at a time when they are about to withdraw, you will not allow Japanese forces to enter?”⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷² Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

⁶⁷³ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

⁶⁷⁴ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

The temporality of Zhou's worry is revealing. It is not what happens *after* US troops withdraw from South Korea, but the possibility of the Japanese taking over while American troops are still inside the country. Zhou returns to this question later on, and repeats it in a different form:

“The immediate question is that the United States has no intention to let the Japanese self-defense troops replace it [United States] in South Korea.”⁶⁷⁵

Kissinger answers in the positive. To convince Zhou that this is indeed the case, Kissinger begins to explain the pacifying role the US's close relationship can have on Japan. Crucially, that there can be such a role is not Zhou's understanding. Zhou is worried that Japanese influence is the very *tail* the US seeks to leave behind. In response, Kissinger is not simply refuting Zhou's presentation, he is actively persuading him of the kind of threat Japan can become if *unleashed* from its ties with Washington. A plethora of arguments are unleashed to support this case:

“A Japan which defends itself with its own resources will be an objective danger to all countries around it because it will be so much more powerful. Therefore, I [Kissinger] believe that its present relationship with the U.S. is actually a restraint on Japan.”⁶⁷⁶

“If we [Americans] were to withdraw, their peaceful nuclear energy program gives them enough plutonium so they could easily build nuclear weapons. So the alternative is really a Japanese nuclear program which would be very much less desirable, and which we oppose.”⁶⁷⁷

“It makes no sense for the United States to have fought World War II to prevent the physical domination of Asia by Japan in order to encourage it 25 years later.”⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁵ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

⁶⁷⁶ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

⁶⁷⁷ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

⁶⁷⁸ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

It is only after these arguments that Zhou notes, for the first time, what Kissinger means with regards to Japan. He does so in the following way:

“I understand what you mean. Japan is a wild house without U.S. control, here, there and everywhere.”⁶⁷⁹

Therefore, that the American presence in the region is beneficial for China is an investment Kissinger makes to counter the charge by Zhou that the US is enabling Japan. Zhou’s initial position is crystal clear in the conversation. It is to have American troops removed from the region, be them in South Korea, Taiwan, or Vietnam. If Zhou ends up appreciating the American perspective, it is not necessarily because he had an intuitive grasp of the balance of power, a claim whose validity would be difficult to assess objectively. It is because of Kissinger’s efforts to convince him of it.⁶⁸⁰

In opposition to substantive disagreements, the two speakers invest in othering the bureaucracy. Productive as it is of a basic commonality, it puts Kissinger in a problematic situation with regards to implementing the promises he makes to Zhou. Because he is bent on excluding members of the State Department in the new initiative towards China, he needs to be on the lookout to make sure advocates of the *old* approach to China do not do and say anything in contradiction with rapprochement. To make sure that whatever they agree to is not, at the very least, contradicted by the American bureaucracy, Kissinger becomes an *enforcer of collective American practices* in light of his *personal understanding* with Zhou. This is a concern raised by Zhou:

⁶⁷⁹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

⁶⁸⁰ This understanding rhymes with the conclusion Goh draws: “Kissinger and Nixon had to persuade the Chinese leaders of the new American image of China, the commonalities between the United States and China, and the shared realist logic of the rapprochement.” Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974*, 155.

“Is it likely to realize a situation of one China and two governments as put forward by the State Department?”⁶⁸¹

Zhou doubles down by adding that the “spearhead of criticism” China aired prior to the October trip was targeted at the State Department,⁶⁸² and *not* at the Nixon-administration. To alleviate Zhou’s fears, Kissinger promises to act on China’s interest *within* the American government. If Zhou notices anything indicating a departure from the private understanding the two of them come to have, Kissinger will make sure to eradicate it. The nature of the following statement by an American diplomat seems highly unusual:

“Again I would like to propose the following to the Prime Minister. If you have any information of any American engaging in those activities [American political speech/behavior contradicting rapprochement] and you give me his name, I can promise you in the name of the President he will be removed.”⁶⁸³

The necessity of reining in the State Department is due to the secrecy of rapprochement. The State Department is unaware of developments transpiring in Beijing, rendering it unable to act on understandings inaugurated by the new US China policy. Because it is unaware, however, it cannot be involved in the implementation of this policy. The one feeds into the other, and while secrecy appears to be conducive for rapprochement, its enactment as a *public policy change* suffers because of it. This point is explicitly made by Kissinger:

“There are many elements in our bureaucracy who are, of course, pursuing the traditional policies. And since we have not told them all the details of the discussions in July, it has not been possible to instill the discipline that will be the case as the years go on.”⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸¹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

⁶⁸² Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

⁶⁸³ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

⁶⁸⁴ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 40.

Because the China policy Kissinger is working to conceive with Zhou is not a common policy of the US government, he is forced to make two claims at once. First, what matters for China is what the Nixon-Kissinger leadership *personally promises*, and, second, what happens in the American bureaucracy in opposition to these promises will be quashed. In acting on both claims at the same time, Kissinger becomes something of a spy on the inside of the American bureaucracy. An example is Kissinger's response when Zhou complains that Admiral McCain is saying loudly that US forces must not withdraw from Indochina:

“That leaves either two choices. He [Admiral McCain] will either carry out his orders [withdrawal], or we [Nixon-administration] will put someone else in charge of these places.”⁶⁸⁵

As in July, Zhou is not on board with the separation of the public from the private, of doing and saying. This is evident in his concern with the ‘untruthful appearance’ of the text of the communique. Zhou goes against the idea that what is said in the document can be separated from the *true, private meaning* the two diplomats reach between themselves. He also makes the case that empty formulas of agreement are unacceptable because of the profound differences obvious in the two countries’ respective positions. Zhou claims that while the Soviets may be fine with this procedure, but “on our [Chinese] side if we agree to do something we will truly do it.”⁶⁸⁶ For Kissinger, no appearance of a document is either truthful or untruthful. It may be interpreted in both ways, but what matters is that the *one interpretation* can be fixed if the two interlocutors establish it in dialogue. Therefore, there is no need to document meticulously what is agreed upon. In fact, *it is impossible*. Kissinger says the following to this effect:

⁶⁸⁵ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 41.

⁶⁸⁶ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

“The things that should matter to you [Zhou] are what I have said, and that the resident will repeat. These are the measures that will guide our policy. What is in a communique is in itself only symbolic.”⁶⁸⁷

“[I]t isn’t possible to refer to understandings in a public communique – we will be spending the next two years explaining what the understandings were.”⁶⁸⁸

Zhou is relentless that the impression “given to other people of the world will not be an honest and we [Chinese] cannot agree” to it.⁶⁸⁹ Following a lengthy historical review, Zhou insists that three kinds of oppression fueling conflict around the globe be spelled out in the communique: war of independence (1), resistance against domestic oppressors (2), and racial discrimination (3). When Zhou mentions the oppression of the colored people in America, Kissinger pushes back:

“Dr. Kissinger: But the Prime Minister is under no illusion that we will tolerate any discussion of our domestic situation in a communique, no matter what he thinks of it?

PM Chou: But I don’t think we should not oppose in general terms racial discrimination.”⁶⁹⁰

At this point, the conversation is deteriorating. The *truthful* appearance of the communique Zhou draws up is unacceptable for Kissinger. It is not that it is untrue from the American perspective, it is that it is *too accurate* for a public statement. Kissinger rejects any mention of the American domestic situation, and he pushes back by arguing that the Chinese cannot put their differences in their most intransigent form:

⁶⁸⁷ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

⁶⁸⁸ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

⁶⁸⁹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

⁶⁹⁰ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

“... he [Nixon] is not coming here to be put into the dock and to be accused of a whole series of American misdeeds. That is not possible.”⁶⁹¹

The problem with the kind of communique Zhou suggests is the same as the problem Kissinger has with the 8-point proposal submitted by North Korea. This is a document Zhou presents to Kissinger in an earlier exchange on behalf of Pyongyang. Kissinger cannot begin to consider its substance because of the way it is phrased:

“[I]t’s difficult for us to accept pieces of paper or documents in which every other sentence says the United States must, the United States must, the United States must. This is not a basis for anyone to deal with us. Of course, the People’s Republic has never done that.”⁶⁹²

This is an interesting response. It is difficult to tell if Kissinger means it as an implicit accusation of the PRC. The last sentence rules out this possibility, but this is an automatic device, a rhetorical gesture, to exonerate Beijing. Importantly, the conversation in July testified to much of the same disgraceful rhetoric Kissinger is critical of in the North Korean *démarche*. Back then, Zhou framed many of his suggestions to Kissinger by what the US *needs* to do to match up in practice with its discourse on peace (globally) and normalization (bilaterally). His rhetoric was peppered with the same kind of ‘musts and shoulds’ Kissinger finds repulsive in the North Korean proposal.

At this point, the conversation is losing momentum. It is not primarily because the two positions are different, but because the implicit agreement of what *they are trying to achieve* seems to no longer hold. This impression is articulated when Kissinger feels to need to spell out what he cherished in the relationship so far:

⁶⁹¹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

⁶⁹² Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 44.

“What I have appreciated about our conversations until now is that between you and us we seem to understand what can be done immediately, what can be done over a longer period of time, and that we would work within that spirit.”⁶⁹³

“The reason why the relationship between our two people has seemed to me so important is precisely because I respect your moral force.”⁶⁹⁴

When Zhou stresses that the communique must reflect what the two sides are doing practically, he is out of touch with the political sensibility Kissinger claims to have witnessed in him. For Kissinger, moral force appears to denote not a commitment to substantive values, but to a specific technique of reasoning. It is an ability to make decisions by balancing between what is necessary and what is possible. In stating explicitly *at this point of the conversation* that the moral force is what he values in the relationship, Kissinger is unmistakable that Zhou’s moral force is missing. That Zhou considered racial discrimination in the US as an issue apt for including in a bilateral communique is evidence to this absence.

Zhou lets off and decides not to raise the issue of racial discrimination again. But he returns to the status of Taiwan and the problem of ambiguity, understood as untruthful appearance, in the communique:

“But if you do not make clear that you will not carry out or support any activities separating Taiwan from China, then one can have two interpretations of this sentence.”⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹³ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

⁶⁹⁴ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

⁶⁹⁵ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

Yet again, Kissinger's response is to stress the priority of private meaning over public expression. What matters is that the Chinese Premier "does not misinterpret our [American] intention."⁶⁹⁶ Even if American behavior does not change, and the joint communique does not include the commitments China seeks, it is the *private assurance* that American change is real and American commitment is in place that makes all the difference. In doing so, Kissinger reduces the *ultimate objective* of the diplomatic encounter, yet again, to a private affair whose purpose is to reach a series of gentlemen's agreements.

Because Zhou continues to stress that the communiqué must state differences unambiguously, and that the US must state its position in Taiwan in straightforward terms, Kissinger shifts strategy. Rather than convincing Zhou why phrasing the communiqué this way is not possible for the US, he *articulates* the counterproductive effects it would have on Sino-US relations. Instead of stressing the impossibility of what Zhou demands, Kissinger *reads* the unambiguous version of the communiqué *through the lens of the average American*. The tactic is different, and more forceful. Kissinger makes the case for why an unambiguous communiqué does not help their cause:

"But if he [Zhou] maintains that the People's Republic must state these views, we [Americans] must state views that are so contrary *again it raises question about what the purpose of the visit was.*"⁶⁹⁷

"The average American... will find a whole list of propositions that will to him appear extraordinarily critical of the United States. With respect to which we are making a whole series of concessions, and he will ask why. What is it that has changed to make us give up long established position?"⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁶ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 51.

⁶⁹⁷ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

⁶⁹⁸ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

In sorting out the acceptable from the unacceptable, Kissinger relies not on his un-American self with which he made strange the foreign policy of earlier administrations. Instead, he reverts to what he thinks *other Americans like him* would read approvingly in the communiqué. These two selves he articulates are, therefore, productive of the encounter. The un-American helps him seek common ground with the Prime Minister of America's implacable foe, an ambition most Americans would find odd if not nonsensical. In turn, the American helps him navigate the limits of what he can commit to substantively.

Despite Kissinger's fine-tuning of the American position, of what he can say and agree to, Zhou remains befuddled by the separation of form and substance. He finds puzzling the notion that the understanding of the two of them cannot be expressed in the communiqué. Zhou reminds Kissinger that settling Taiwan's status as China's internal affair is a point agreed to by the American diplomat. If expressing it publicly is not possible, then perhaps the issuing of a joint communique is unnecessary:

“This [understanding on Taiwan] is what you [Kissinger] have said all along, and your side expressed a willingness to do this.”⁶⁹⁹

“[A]s I [Zhou] had said to you before, Chairman Mao also considered that if it is not possible to agree on a communique, then we might consider not issuing any communique at all.”⁷⁰⁰

This is obviously unacceptable. If the Nixon-visit is to be historical in breaking through the decades-long impasse between China and the US, then a document symbolizing the coming of a new era must be its logical conclusion. Kissinger also adds his usual proviso, stressing that “it's

⁶⁹⁹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

⁷⁰⁰ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

possible for us to do more than we can say.”⁷⁰¹ Nevertheless, to meet Zhou halfway, he is willing to say something in the document “to indicate a direction,” but, importantly, “we cannot say everything we have discussed.”⁷⁰² But this is no way out from the problem as Zhou understands it. If only a *direction* is indicated, then normalization is clearly not under way. It is certainly not under way in a public sense. For Zhou, the indication of a direction is merely an expression of interest, and *not the real thing*.

This is, therefore, yet another paradoxical development. Having to say something in the communiqué is due to the necessity of imbuing the diplomatic encounter with significance the public in both countries can come to recognize and accept. The meeting between Zhou and Kissinger is clearly not a private affair. It is geared towards identifying a ‘basis of understanding’ upon which the old state of affairs can begin to be reconfigured. But because the understandings Kissinger and Zhou come to have are specific to them, these understandings are *private* rather than public. Whatever points Zhou and Kissinger identify as common, they have to do with a gentleman’s agreement to which Kissinger personally commits to on behalf of the president. In addition, the very meeting between the two parties is possible because of the willingness of the Nixon-administration to act on its new China initiative outside the rest of the American government. When Kissinger says that people in the State Department are unable to understand this enterprise, what he means is not that the Chinese are comprehensible only to him. It is, rather, that only *he knows what to promise for the relationship to work*, and this ability has to do with his conceptualization of the new policy.

⁷⁰¹ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

⁷⁰² Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 52.

The separation between saying publicly and saying privately – between form and substance – becomes the bane and boon of rapprochement. It guarantees its progression for the time being, but it is only the collapsing of these distinctions that it can turn into a public, rather than private, affair. Until this happens, normalization is an idea, and Kissinger’s task is to convince Zhou that it is the real thing. This dilemma is nicely expressed by Kissinger in a quip that outlived its immediate context (emphasis added):

“The problem is that we disagree, not that we don’t understand each other. We understand each other very well. *The Prime Minister seeks clarity, and I am trying to achieve ambiguity.*”⁷⁰³

Because they disagree in substance, an *understanding* of this difference needs to suffice to propel rapprochement forward. To demonstrate that it complies with this understanding, Zhou has to refrain from supercharging the communiqué with *substantive* differences. Note that diplomacy becomes, in this exchange, a concern with the other. What Kissinger emphasizes is finding a way for both sides to *persist in its own idiosyncratic practices*, rather than insisting on a template of expression to which both parties clearly cannot commit. That is, Zhou is downright *selfish* in wanting to hijack the document to serve China’s ideological needs.

“The Prime Minister knows what we would do, and I have the impression this is considered by him to be in a positive direction. Therefore, our problem is to find a formulation which enables us to navigate between our various necessities, domestic and international.”⁷⁰⁴

Steering clear of this possibility requires both sides to have eyes on the same prize:

⁷⁰³ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 55.

⁷⁰⁴ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 55.

“[W]e have an important decision to make, and the decision is whether we are starting a new period or engaging a tactic in a struggle. I am speaking with great frankness. We are trying to begin a new era.”⁷⁰⁵

This objective would not be borne out by the Chinese version of the communique prioritizing the explicitness of differences. Indeed, it would be close to meaningless from the American perspective:

“It is really that I am afraid that when the President reads this document and sees the first five pages list nothing but disagreements he will say, “what is it really that we are trying to do here?”⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁵ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 54.

⁷⁰⁶ Phillips, vol. E-13., Document 55.

7.5. Kissinger's report to Nixon of the October trip to Beijing

Much like following the July trip, Kissinger reported his experience of the October trip to Nixon.⁷⁰⁷ Much like the first report, this document is also riddled with attempts to square the circle. It presents the exchanges in a more positive light, stressing points of convergence over which the two sides never reached consensus. It keeps silent over the demonstrable hardening of the Chinese position compared with its stance during the July encounter. This skewing of the discussion is an outcome not simply of the necessity to produce an actionable rendition of what was achieved and what is further to be done. Just as it was the case in the July report, it is also the byproduct of Kissinger *expropriating* China's perspective and presenting its interest *via his interpretation*. Because he has a choice to make in how he illuminates what he thinks is the meaning of the Chinese position, he continues to paint a portrayal in which the discussions were successful, and that their continuation is warranted.

Early on in the report, Kissinger pronounces that the most important commonality is the same as it was at the start:

“The basic premises on which we have both moved to open a dialogue remain. Both sides know there are profound differences but recognize that domestic and international constraints demand a phased resolution of outstanding issues.”⁷⁰⁸

The term ‘phased resolution’ is reference to patience and gradualism. This is the peculiar American approach that came about due to the incompatibility of the necessity of rapprochement and its

⁷⁰⁷ Kissinger's 32-page memorandum to Nixon dated 11 November 1971 is available in full as ‘Document 20’ on the National Security Archive website at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB70/doc20.pdf>. However, because this report is also reproduced in full in volume XVII of the Foreign Relations of the United States, it is to this volume that page references are made in this section. Phillips, *Foreign Relations of the United States, China, 1969-1976*, vol. XVII., Document 164, 524–58.

⁷⁰⁸ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 525.

present impossibility. The statement locates both sides in consensus. In the following, Kissinger further expounds the Chinese commitment to the American approach:

“Chou confirmed an essential ingredient for launching this process [rapprochement] and moving it forward – Chinese willingness, despite their past rhetoric, to be patient on solutions.”⁷⁰⁹

The second ingredient in Kissinger’s interpretation is another consistent theme in the Chinese approach. It is China’s disdain

“for submerging differences in ambiguous formulas of agreement... which only serve to make relations look more “normal” than they really are.”⁷¹⁰

The Chinese behavior made up of these ingredients is what Kissinger claims to be paradoxical. Notwithstanding the patience it demonstrates, China wants to move forward because it cannot stand formulas that make it seem like the relationship with the US is normal. The sooner the relationship is normalized in reality, the less reliant the two sides are on empty slogans that display only a veneer of normalcy. But in wanting to make the relationship normal, it demonstrates its patience by understanding that time is of the essence. Pulling in opposite directions, these motivations explain why the Chinese are ambivalent.

It is hard to see the source of this ambivalence in anything other than the American position itself. By stressing the timeliness of normalization as well as the impossibility of doing it right away, the American approach is pregnant with the paradox Kissinger attributes to Zhou’s position. The imperative for change on the Chinese side is rooted in this predicament, in welcoming an American diplomat who is talking the talk of normalization but refuses to walk the walk. What is more, this

⁷⁰⁹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 526.

⁷¹⁰ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 526.

diplomat unloads a plethora of reasons why walking the walk in the present is illogical because it is *counterproductive* for implementing the very endeavor. In the report, Kissinger spells out that the need for time and patience makes sense in the American approach, and also that what rapprochement depends on is (emphasis added):

“China’s willingness to accept *our* thesis, that to push the process too fast and too explicitly could wreck the whole fabric of our China initiative.”⁷¹¹

For China, this argument is at odds with the explicit *political will* the Nixon-administration demonstrates in wanting to normalize relations. If the decision of doing so is already made, then what can possibly incapacitate its implementation? It does not register for Kissinger that China’s ambivalence has to do with an American position that wants to have its cake and eat it, too. It seeks to make China *act on an understanding of normalization* in the absence of official recognition.

This, then, explains why Kissinger is bent on seeking convergence in *interpretation only*. American foreign policy is a juggernaut that cannot change its direction overnight. Kissinger is unable to tell his Chinese interlocutor that rapprochement is soon to be enacted in American practice. Instead, he is trying to impress that the *current state of affairs* in American foreign policy is not actually antithetical to China’s interest. That is, though the present status quo will change very slowly in the region, in the meantime, there is a way to understand it as beneficial for Beijing. This *rewiring of the Chinese perspective* is most evident in the discussion over Japan and its possible moving into Taiwan. Kissinger reports to Nixon that

“the Chinese are painfully preoccupied and ambivalent on this issue [Japan] – they seem both genuinely to fear Japanese remilitarism and to recognize that our defense cooperation with Tokyo exercises restraint.”⁷¹²

⁷¹¹ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 536.

⁷¹² Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 527.

To begin with, there is hardly anything overtly ambivalent about this position on the face of it. If the Chinese are fearful of Japanese aggression, then it is possible that they appreciate the restraining role the US can exercise over Japan. It is ambivalent in Kissinger's description, however, because he remembers that Zhou used to be adamant that all American troops need to withdraw from the Far East. Importantly, the idea that complying with this demand may not be advantageous to Beijing comes from Kissinger himself. It was who he actively made the case for Zhou to reappraise the meaning of the American military presence. He reports these efforts to Nixon accurately:

“I said that it was relatively easy for us to prevent the projection of Japanese military presence on Taiwan while our forces were there; but if we departed, this was less under our control.”⁷¹³

Ultimately, the account is also transparent about the inchoateness of the American interest in rapprochement. Reporting to Nixon what he told Zhou of this basis, Kissinger writes that:

“Our policy is based on the profound conviction that better relations are in our interest and is not an attempt to create a power combination.”⁷¹⁴

The sentence may be more accurate if it said that the *very policy* of the United States is nothing more, nothing less than this profound conviction. It is not agreement in substantive interests, and certainly not a commonality of philosophical approach. It is a conviction, a deeply-held idea. Acting on this conviction, Kissinger is having to deal in promises, which he asks Zhou consistently to accept as veritable speech acts productive of a new state of affairs in the relationship. That better relations are *in the interest* of the US is practically borne out only in the occasional pilgrimage

⁷¹³ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 539.

⁷¹⁴ Phillips, vol. XVII., Document 164, 528.

Kissinger makes to China, but American policy does not reflect it more broadly. To survive as a collective enterprise, therefore, rapprochement depends not on a great convergence of China's needs and concerns and those of the US. It depends, rather, on the acceptance of the idea of normalization as an *intersubjective belief*.

7.6. *US-China diplomatic encounters reappraised as a case of diplomatic normalization*

Overall, the transcripts paint the picture of a combative dialogue between Kissinger and Zhou. They testify to the inchoateness of an *idea of normalization* and the difficulty of conversing against the backdrop of such a rudimentary understanding. Kissinger and Zhou come to the negotiating table, but other than this show of willingness most everything else in the conversation – limitations, possibilities, neuralgic points etc. – need to be mapped out by them. They proceed by establishing differences and similarities. When a substantive question pits them against each other, they retreat to a point of commonality. After a point of commonality gives them temporary respite, they launch themselves back into the fray. The resulting game is that between approximation and estrangement. The integration of views and their subsequent separation are the basic, dialectical rhythm in which the conversation unfolds.

The differences stressed by the two sides animate the discussion because they *complicate it*. These differences come in many flavors and stripes. They are not just about the overarching purpose of the meeting, which Kissinger seeks to tie in a broad sense to matters of international concern, but which Zhou wants to limit to the bilateral issue of normalization. These differences also stem from the respective temporalities in which the two speakers wish to operate, and the respective positions they take up in the conversation. Zhou stresses past mistakes of American foreign policy as pregnant with the contemporary state of affairs in the region, while Kissinger is trying to separate the past from the present. Zhou takes the role of a judge litigating the criminal activities of the US, while Kissinger is the defendant explaining the misdeeds of his country. Zhou is combative, less formal, Kissinger is flattering, more formal. Zhou is the primary author of clashes in argument, Kissinger is the primary author of finding refuge and saving the conversation. Zhou is less inclined

to hold back, Kissinger is more inclined to accept the subaltern position from which he responds. Zhou is the host that opened the door, Kissinger is the guest looking to sell his goods.

These differences coexist with similarities. Kissinger estranges previous American governments and their historical wrongdoings to make the case for the uniqueness of the Nixon-administration. He articulates his criticism *on behalf* of Zhou, professing familiarity with the shortcomings of American foreign policy from the Chinese perspective. The Nixon-administration is different in having a clean slate and an un-American political agency to enact change towards China. Though Kissinger stresses the tectonic shifts in world politics bringing the two sides together, his argument towards Zhou is singularly focused on the *agential* character of rapprochement. This explains the disdain towards the bureaucracy. The machinery of government makes possible the conduct of diplomacy in an ordinary way, but it is an administrative structure geared towards maintaining, rather than initiating, relations between states. Furthermore, the encounter with Zhou is a political, rather than diplomatic, affair. Its participants are not greasing the wheels of diplomacy,⁷¹⁵ or executing a foreign policy conceptualized prior to the encounter. The encounter itself is the terrain upon which the purpose of dialogue is negotiated as it pertains to the historical context of the bilateral relationship. If diplomatic normalization takes place in the Kissinger-Zhou encounter, it is not because they converge in matters of substance. It is because they manage to establish a *deep similarity that construes them as strangers* interested in keeping the conversation going. It is the mutual agreement that Nixon-administration is un-American, with an exceptional political agency at its disposal, that commits Kissinger and Zhou to continuing dialogue. The impetus propelling

⁷¹⁵ Adler-Nissen, “Just Greasing the Wheels?”

the encounter forward is to further discuss and negotiate just what this exceptional political agency means for a new era of US-China relations.

Dispositions specific to the two diplomats also seem to converge. Neither Kissinger, nor Zhou question that *there are* fundamental questions, that the answers to them are specific to each side, and that they need to be addressed to propel rapprochement forward. The transcripts demonstrate a convergence not of substance, but of method of engagement. It is not consensus itself, but the ambition to reach consensus over meaning that commits both sides to asking, probing, and clarifying. Implicit thought it may be, there is an acceptance informing attempts to expound misunderstandings, to disambiguate ambiguities, and to illuminate confusions. There is no end to these attempts. The problems to be addressed arise with the unfolding of the conversation. They come about as remnants of prior efforts meant to fix a previous set of misinterpretations. These issues are rooted in the disconnect between what one means, on the one hand, and the sense the other attributes to it, on the other. Zhou and Kissinger tacitly agree, therefore, over the ambition to approximate discursive practices and their corresponding meaning. This is a paradoxical enterprise, however, because there is no authoritative way to fix meaning in the diplomatic encounter. Crucially, however, as long as the social agreement holds to try what is impossible, the dialogue continues.

Kissinger's accounts of the trips analyzed in juxtaposition with the transcripts are revealing of a puzzling phenomenon. The reporting of a diplomatic encounter is hardly ever in sync with the written evidence of the dialogue making up the encounter. In many cases, however, the claims Kissinger puts forward to Nixon are in clear opposition to Zhou's emphasis during the meetings. The issue is not that Kissinger's sense-making process has to map onto the transcripts themselves. There is some distance Kissinger has to travel in relating his experience in Beijing to the terms in

which he can express it and through which he can report it to Nixon. Rather, the issue is the absence of any trace whatsoever on the basis of which an outside reader were able to conclude a particular point stressed by Kissinger. Because many of these points are contradicted by what Zhou said, this begs the question of how and why Kissinger reported the encounter the way he did. In extremis, what is disturbing is the very possibility of concluding the *exact opposite* of what Kissinger reports to Nixon on key issues, and to do so reliably by reference to the textual evidence.

The answer to this conundrum is that Kissinger is not reporting what transpired in Beijing. He is *translating* it. Though the two speakers spell out, repeat, and clarify what they mean throughout their engagements for the sake of mutual understanding, *this can never make what is being said speak for itself*. There is certainly no way to capture it in the prison of a transcript. To make it intelligible for those who sent him on his mission, Kissinger articulates the experience in wider categories and terms. He relies on a vocabulary he can expect to resonate with them. He may be inaccurate in his rendition of the dialogue, but the need to express, indeed to identify, the meaning of the trips for US policy takes precedence over loyalty to the complex character of his talks. In bridging the gap between the richness of his experience and the imperative of an actionable summary, Kissinger becomes a mediator *par excellence*. Instead of reporting the deep, latent similarity between himself and Zhou, Kissinger *fleshes it out* with a meaningful, substantive similarity. In expressing Zhou as concerned with the balance of power, Kissinger makes an implicit choice in conceptualizing the Chinese Premier this way rather than another. In painting an Orientalizing picture of the Chinese leaders as troubled by their inner contradiction, by wanting to do what is right even if it means going against their ideological principles, he tells Nixon that the Chinese are cognizant, like the American administration, of the historic task ahead of them. In doing so, Kissinger invests in rationalizing the continuation of dialogue. He reports his encounters

as indicative of the necessity of bilateral diplomacy, and relies on the un-American self-understandings of the Nixon-administration to express what China is. The opening to China is a grandiose initiative in the context of realpolitik, and the Chinese leaders are cast in agreement with the nature of the endeavor. Nixon and Kissinger conceptualized it *despite* the idealism of American foreign policy mitigating against it, and China's commitment to the initiative came about in the same way, by fighting off domestic enemies seeking to sabotage closer ties with Washington. Leaders of the two countries beat the odds to begin to normalize relations despite serious differences between them.

The perception of this substantive likeness came to be after Kissinger estranged the moralism and idealism informing US foreign policy since the Second World War. Demonstrated in chapter 6, Kissinger *othered* the Wilsonian legacy and expressed a rudimentary need for a normatively preferable US identity based on realpolitik. The un-American concern with the international equilibrium was productive of a new systemic reason, or moral purpose, in which relations with China were reassessed. This meant that China 'became' an expression of *what the US needs China to be in world politics*. The specific identity imputed to the Chinese other was a *function of* what the American self ambited to achieve at this historical moment of the Cold War. Nixon and Kissinger saw in the Chinese leaders "scientists of equilibrium, artists of relativity,"⁷¹⁶ but only to the extent that the realpolitik China symbolized held the key to remedying the problem identified by this very same administration: the absence of order in world politics. Put differently, it was the international equilibrium and Kissinger's fascination with fixing it that rendered China's identity in terms compatible with this objective. Having yoked a new purpose for American foreign policy

⁷¹⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 50.

away from Wilsonianism and towards *realpolitik*, Kissinger expressed China committed to its national interest as a *logical boundary* of this endeavor.

Later on, China was interpellated in this critical re-imagination to a significant degree, and the pioneering encounters with Zhou were instrumental. China facilitated this process by functioning as a *placeholder* of this new, desirable identity. It became a host of fantasies, an imaginary social space in which *realpolitik* is the order of the day. Nixon and Kissinger *symbolically invested* in the Chinese other the desirable US identity they conjured to replace the Wilsonian tradition. American discourse about China was not, therefore, about China.⁷¹⁷ It was auto-biographical.⁷¹⁸ The praise American diplomats showered at China was no more than the adulation of their very own fictions. This construction of fundamental identity between American self (as hypothesized by estranging from the traditional American self) and Chinese other (as expressed in terms of a desirable US identity) is what informed the continuation of diplomatic dialogue. When Nixon and Kissinger looked their Chinese counterparts in the eye, they saw their very own selves looking back at them. In wanting to talk to Mao and Zhou, Nixon and Kissinger wanted to talk to themselves.

⁷¹⁷ Said famously details in the introduction of his book that the discourse making up orientalism is not descriptive of a social-geographical space subsumed under the label 'Orient.' Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin, 2003), 12.

⁷¹⁸ Chengxin Pan, "The 'China Threat' in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 3 (June 2004): 305–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540402900304>.

7.7. Conclusion

Kissinger and the initiated few in the Nixon-administration took it upon themselves to mediate between two estranged worlds. One was an American that spoke the language of idealism, the other a Chinese that spoke the language of realpolitik. Nurturing his strangeness to his own society helped Kissinger vindicate this role of mediation to himself. In fulfilling this function, he employed a diplomatic technique by discharging meanings not grounded in either Chinese or American society. He relied on his familiarity with *European* realpolitik and turned it into the indispensable *lingua franca* to discover, channel, and narrate the congruence of Sino-American diplomacy. The normative-institutional estrangement Kissinger sought was pregnant of his ability to identify this common language. But the ambition to speak this language and shape American diplomacy according to it was also the very purpose that fueled his need for estranging from his adopted home. Though it is unlikely that rapprochement can be condensed into any one story, it seems legitimate that Kissinger's estrangement from America and homecoming to China is an important development driving the necessity of Sino-American dialogue.

Kissinger came under heat for his thinking as well as for his behind-the-scene undertakings in faraway countries. Schulzinger criticized him for being sentimental in his attachment to a "vision of foreign policy called geopolitics, which is almost *pure fantasy*."⁷¹⁹ Kissinger mistakenly assumed the relative permanence of national interests guiding individual states, and sought to mold America according to this view by estranging what he claimed to be its misguided faith in the *permanence* of idealism. The conviction that geopolitics should be the new, permanent compass for foreign policy was, in Schulzinger's view, just as misguided. In a similar vein, Nancy Bernkopf

⁷¹⁹ Quoted in Edward P. Crapol and Robert D. Schulzinger, "Kissinger: Doctor of Diplomacy/Professor of Hype," *Reviews in American History* 19, no. 2 (June 1991): 262, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2703081>.

Tucker argued that Kissinger's version of rapprochement is "mythological." It created the impression that the turnaround in the early 1970s between China and the US was "almost by magic."⁷²⁰

Though understandable, the premise of such criticism is strange. Fantasies and mythologies can be fictitious in an ontological sense without losing anything of their *truthfulness as social narratives*. They can be unreal objectively but very real because social actors behave *as if* they were true. Once notions of accuracy, correspondence, and objectivity are abandoned, the American narrative of realpolitik becomes, indeed, a fantasy of profound *social and political consequences*. In this spirit, this chapter focused on the conditions of possibility and necessity in whose context the American opening to China turned into a *prudential choice in foreign policy*. It was argued that reaching such an understanding was rooted in the un-American thoughts and practices of the Nixon-administration.

Key in evaluating this social process is not, then, the *objective reality* of estrangement, nor whether Nixon and Kissinger were genuinely alone in this experience. They were not. To a certain point, the State Department was more active in deliberating about a new China policy than the White House in 1969. People other than Kissinger likewise felt the need to think about alternatives. But once the conflict between China and the Soviet Union was deciphered as a window of opportunity *for something*, Kissinger pressed ahead to make sense of it by reliance on his fundamental concern with the international equilibrium. Thereafter, he invested in re-imagining the US-China relationship by expressing China, in particular, as the logical boundary of a new *raison de système* he construed as incompatible with traditional American foreign policy. To the extent that

⁷²⁰ See footnote 1 in Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Taiwan Expendable? Nixon and Kissinger Go to China," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (June 1, 2005): 109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660527>.

Kissinger's un-American concern with the international order was productive of the new China policy, his estrangement was crucial in realizing the necessity of diplomatic dialogue. To the extent that the Nixon-administration succeeded in *embodying in diplomatic practice that which it conjectured* about China, its social conditions form a necessary part of understanding the inception of rapprochement and its subsequent unfolding. In other words, these conditions *increased the likelihood* that the authoritative statement rationalizing the opening to China would emanate from the normative-institutional fringes of the American government. Paradoxically, this social periphery happened to be no other than the White House in the early 1970s.

The process of estrangement and conceptualization chapters 5 and 6 discussed was infused with a diplomatic quality in two basic senses. On the one hand, the Nixon-administration distanced itself from established norms and practices to reflexively deliberate about what is to be done with China. The recognition of having to make choices in such deliberations was explicit, and it was by articulating a new moral purpose *with the participation of China in it* that the opening became a reasonable decision. This means that a new state of affairs was imagined establishing a sense of similarity between China and the US. The normative approximation achieved in this imagination is what informed the newfound necessity of diplomatic dialogue. On the other hand, this construction of China policy worked by re-imagining not just the Chinese other, but the American self, too. Just as George Kennan reflected in his reports from the Soviet Union "on the kind of society that he wanted the US to be and that he, as a diplomat, wanted to represent,"⁷²¹ Kissinger expressed a desirable alternative US identity that he wished to enact in his dealings with China. The similarity the Nixon-administration identified between the US and China fueled, therefore, a critical scrutiny of what the US should be at this historical moment of the Cold War. The process

⁷²¹ Wiseman, "Engaging the Enemy," 222.

was not just reflexive, it held much critical diplomatic potential to improve understandings between the two erstwhile enemies.⁷²²

The excessive reliance on secrecy also acquires a new meaning in light of a social approach. On 19 July 1971, Nixon claimed that

“Without secrecy, there would have been no invitation or acceptance to visit China. Without secrecy, there is no chance of success in it.”⁷²³

In a direct sense, the imperative for secrecy is the consequence of the social distance required to nurture an alternative vision of China. But it is also evidence for something else. It is that the administration preferred to postpone the *domestication* of realpolitik until after rapprochement is enacted. Indeed, Nixon and Kissinger intentionally delayed meeting the very challenge that comes with being a *first diplomat*. In Der Derian’s explanation, the first diplomat

“must commit a highly irrational act when he decides to parley with rather than kill an enemy. Since he and his enemy are not subject to the laws of a single sovereign, his success – and future safety – largely reside in a single factor: the power to turn that irrational act into a ritual, that is, giving it a rational explanation and a social significance which a community will come to recognize habitually.”⁷²⁴

⁷²² This author is aware of the stains left by the specific undertakings of American foreign policy during the Kissinger-era. Many of them operated with a blatant disregard for human life, particularly in East Asia. The invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and the US’s tacit approval of Indonesia’s assault against East Timor in 1975 are examples testifying to this sorry record in foreign policy. But these decisions were neither a cause nor an effect of the opening to China orchestrated in the early 1970s. Likewise, the notion that Nixon and Kissinger acted diplomatically towards China is not to imply that such is their very essence as political actors. For a fuller exploration of American misconduct during the Kissinger-era see Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, (New York: Twelve, 2012); Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

⁷²³ Briefing of the White House Staff on the July 15 Announcement of the President’s Trip to Peking, July 19, 1971, 1. Available in full as Document 41 at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-41.pdf>.

⁷²⁴ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 144.

Secrecy disguised an ambition to *create facts on the ground first*. Nixon and Kissinger kept most everyone out of the loop because they saw no way to bridge the *abyss* between the moral purpose they conjectured to inform China and the US, on the one hand, and the idealist straitjacket that left no room for realpolitik in US foreign policy, on the other. Secrecy was meant to help make a new state of affairs between China and the US a *fait accompli*, and to imbue it with social significance only retrospectively in front of the American public. It expressed the administration's very confession, then, that the opening towards China was *socially illegitimate behavior*. It was by and large unsanctioned by the established norms and practices of American diplomacy. What the strangers operating China policy from the White House did was precisely to *rationalize* why such a serious transgression is worth the risk. In Kissinger's reasoning, it was due to the audacity of the enterprise, its sheer *incomprehensibility* for his fellow Americans, that secrecy was the only way to make it happen. It was to make sure, in the words of Kissinger, that openness and transparency do not "kill the child before it is born."⁷²⁵ That this narrative was politically *self-serving* does not refute the fact that these individuals did act in accordance with that which they conceptualized. It does imply, however, a troublesome political philosophy on the part of these practitioners. In the words of a reviewer,

"Kissinger appears to believe, perhaps without fully realizing the selfish and undemocratic implications of doing so, that the significance of a political act lies in its meaning for the actor himself, and *only* for that person."⁷²⁶

Finally, it seems plausible that the drive to be un-American disguised a very American habitus neither Kissinger nor Nixon managed to shed. In chapter 6, Kissinger has been shown to be

⁷²⁵ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 337.

⁷²⁶ Alan K. Henrikson, "The Moralists as Geopoliticians," *The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy* 5, no. 2 (1981): 392.

unloading ideas and norms found to be useless in dealing with China. Banishing old norms of American diplomacy and isolating from the State Department disguised a preference for acting and doing, rather than *deliberating about* acting and doing. Fascinated by Mao and Zhou, Nixon and Kissinger projected that the possibility of political action in China is *limitless*. This radical freedom is what they sought to enact in their own social setting. Estrangement became a practical answer to the imperative of rescuing American political agency from its decades-long shackles, normative as well as institutional, and to render the domestic space for decision-making as *akin* to the Chinese.

And yet, in feeling an irresistible urge to do *something* about China, he was eminently American, imitating his predecessors no less eager to make their mark on the large canvass of American foreign policy. That *this* was his responsibility to undertake is the one part of his practical sense he neither investigated nor abandoned, willing to go against the grain and the American public, wanting relentlessly to “stitch together a paradoxical alliance.”⁷²⁷ In casting out the paralyzing norms having plagued American diplomacy for decades, Kissinger seemed *to be realizing his true Americanness*. The drive to be un-American revealed an exceptionalist habitus that was characteristically American. In his famous interview with Italian reporter Oriana Fallaci, Kissinger comes close to articulating the bare minimum of this pure American subject he aspires to be, giving an implicit answer to the baseline of not what he thinks *about* but what he thinks *from*. Revealing his “technique,” the metaphor he develops and in whose terms he expresses himself is that of the American *cowboy*. At this point, it is worth quoting the conversation at length (all emphases added):

⁷²⁷ Oriana Fallaci, *Interview with History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 17.

“H. K. [Henry Kissinger]: ... I’ve always acted *alone*. Americans like that immensely. Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding *ahead alone* on his horse, the cowboy who rides all *alone* into the town, the village, with his horse and *nothing else*. Maybe even without a pistol, since he doesn’t shoot. *He acts*, that’s all, by being in the right place at the right time. In short, a Western.

O. F. [Oriana Fallaci]: I see. You see yourself as a kind of Henry Fonda, unarmed and ready to fight with his fists for honest ideals...

H.K.: Not necessarily courageous. In fact, this cowboy doesn’t have to be courageous. *All he needs is to be alone*, to show others that he rides into the town and *does everything by himself*. This amazing, romantic character suits me precisely because *to be alone* has always been part of my style or, if you like, my technique.”⁷²⁸

It is tempting to conclude that being a cowboy is the pre-intentional state in which Kissinger’s practical sense is rooted, the very predisposition that unknowingly feeds into his behavior and thinking. In all probability, Kissinger did not simply recover his pre-reflexive kernel, much less express it in such an unambiguous metaphor as that of the cowboy. But if whatever social actors do are always more meaningful *than they themselves realize*,⁷²⁹ then the metaphor is revealing of something lying at the heart of Kissinger understood as a practical individual. Kissinger’s obsession with solitude is, it seems, no other than the unconscious expression of his *fascination with agency*, the unquenchable thirst to act. The cowboy is the symbolic conduit borrowed from American culture through which Kissinger attempts to articulate that which is hard-wired into his being. The cowboy acting alone is the verbal proxy for a statesman wanting to do things without hindrance. What Kissinger embraced in China is, then, its *very agency*. It is the sense that China is unchained by practices and ways of thinking that render America inhospitable to full-fledged political agency.

⁷²⁸ Fallaci, *Interview with History*, 41.

⁷²⁹ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 69.

8. Conclusion

8.1. *A postcolonial detour and the problem of sameness in US-China rapprochement*

Nixon and Kissinger sought refuge in the reassuring identity they claim to have witnessed in their Chinese counterparts. They unloaded their fantasies and desires onto the Chinese other, the mere vessel of a malleable identity in the American impression, to be molded accordingly within the American gaze. This shaping followed a godly, colonial logic, with the American sculptors relying on their very own image to format China. The former enmity was replaced, and the vacuum of what China is was filled with the self-fascinations of the Nixon-administration. In all dimensions of behavior deemed socially relevant and normatively preferable, the Chinese leaders were *no different* from the American diplomats. They were smart, strategic, tactful, hard-willed, confident, cognizant of the national interest, and eager to act upon it. In matters of secondary importance, the American self continued to relegate whatever *inscrutable* remained of Chinese difference to the dumping-ground of cultural exoticism. The Chinese were subtle, attentive, fine-tuned, competent in gestures, the curator of signs, the knower of symbols. In all *oriental* ways of conveying meaning, they were *unlike* the American diplomats. These remnants of Chinese otherness were indissoluble in Washington's imagery, but their social salience was consciously denied. The Chinese were different, but this difference did not make much of a *difference*. The American self framed China's strategic identity as *superior* to its cultural limitations. The latter did not incapacitate the former, it made it even more meaningful in the American gaze.

Likeness and identity is in the eye of the beholder, not an ontological stage to be reached by social actors. It is not an objective quality directly accessible by looking at *how things stand* in a relationship. It was thus not *genuine, objective* approximation between the American self and the Chinese other that breathed new life into bilateral diplomacy. Rather, it was the projection of the

self onto the other, the mapping of self-fantasies onto the Chinese other and a confirmation of the awesomeness of the American self-identity. In opposition to the post-classical ideal, normalization had nothing to do with the moral imperative of looking critically into the mirror of the other for self-reflection. It was the other way around. Kissinger and Nixon looked into the eyes of their Chinese counterparts to escape their sense of strangeness *vis-à-vis* America, and to find solace in knowing that differences notwithstanding, they are identical.

The American approach to the Chinese other is reminiscent of the *fetishism* that objectifies a social figure by projecting onto it the social fantasies of the self. The stranger is typically a servant of this function.⁷³⁰ In embodying the anxieties, frustrations, but also fascinations of the self, the stranger is actually *no stranger anymore*. He becomes familiar, someone who is *close* to the self by virtue of embodying all that has been designated, and therefore recognized, as *beyond the self*. The empirical argument of this thesis demonstrated a problem in construing *familiar* strangers. If certain others are “designated as *stranger than other others*,”⁷³¹ then this process is responsible for *ontologizing* social experiences in certain ways. It makes those deemed dangerous and undesirable recognizable. Society’s reaction to these social delinquents is typically to resort to social discipline and other forms of rule. The alternative response is equally well-known. It is to champion otherness, and to embrace it *via* an ethics of alterity. Such welcoming continues to rely, however, on the process of differentiation. If ‘stranger danger’ is the outcome of the objectification of social relations, then the *universal* stranger, able to collapse self and other, is the outcome of the “transformation of fantasies into figures.”⁷³² The violence in saying that most everyone *is* a stranger

⁷³⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Transformations (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁷³¹ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 6.

⁷³² Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 5.

consists in the “‘cutting off’ of figures from the social and material relations which overdetermine their existence, and the consequent perception that such figures have a ‘life of their own’.”⁷³³ It is to render the other in a recognizable format that the other is stripped of its social overdetermination.

In the context of diplomacy, this issue of social figurability helps draw out two problems associated with Der Derian’s well-known quip at the end of his seminal book:

“[O]ur greatest need reflects our gravest danger: until we learn how to recognize ourselves as the Other, we shall be in danger and we shall be in need of diplomacy.”⁷³⁴

Estranging the self to see it in the image of the other may seem morally preferable, particularly if the alternative is to conserve an essential hostility between self and other. But this option is available, to repeat, at the price of removing self and other from their contexts of determination, imposing a totality not of difference but of similarity. The post-classical insistence on the morality of caring for otherness is suspect for this reason. Kissinger and Nixon *eradicated* in their conceptualization of China what Connolly calls the “enigma of otherness.”⁷³⁵ The second issue with Der Derian’s statement is the association of social danger with the need for diplomacy. The empirical analysis mounted a powerful case to illustrate that social danger in the form of radical difference is *counterproductive* for diplomacy. Kissinger and Nixon were committed to a diplomatic opening not because of the social danger the Chinese leaders and their state represented. Unconsciously following Der Derian’s imperative, the American leaders *did* recognize themselves

⁷³³ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 5.

⁷³⁴ Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 209.

⁷³⁵ Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, 36.

in the Chinese others. Rather than making diplomacy unnecessary, this sense of identity in the American perspective is what informed a continuous preference for diplomatic dialogue.

8.2. *Summary of the theoretical and empirical argument*

This thesis investigated the process of diplomatic normalization and its application to US-China rapprochement. The first part of the thesis was dedicated to developing the theoretical argument. It started by claiming that diplomacy emerges if two conditions are in place, its necessity and possibility. Chapter 2 offered a review of classical and post-classical approaches to diplomacy. It concluded that diplomacy is a purposive endeavor in the classical imagination tied to systemic and state-level imperatives. It also found that the possibility of diplomacy is closely connected to reflexivity and the mediation of difference between self and other in the post-classical ethos. To continue the conceptual journey, chapter 3 argued that diplomatic normalization can be understood as a practical change fueled by a new purpose of the bilateral relationship taking the place of enmity. Because practices lend themselves to both stability as well as transformation, their correspondence with accepted meanings is key in scrutinizing either of these two outcomes. The concept of yoking was discussed as a social mechanism whereby *reflexive deliberations* about practical purposes can unfold. This meant that to theorize about diplomatic normalization is to theorize about the context in which *thinking diplomatically* becomes necessary and possible. There has to be prior normative space for conceptualizing the bilateral relationship differently. Chapter 4 claimed that social distance is the normative space in which these alternative conceptualizations can be accommodated. The chapter also introduced and discussed in detail the three stages of the analytical framework of diplomatic normalization. It begins with the estrangement of the status quo (1), to be followed by the conceptualization of the relationship in terms of a new purpose (2), and concludes with the enactment of diplomatic encounters (3).

The second part of the thesis was dedicated to the empirical argument. Chapter 5 offered a critical problematization of the mainstream literature on US-China rapprochement. This review found the

literature to be wanting in terms of theoretical coherence and empirical accuracy. It was argued that the literature is testimony to the retrospective rationalization of rapprochement as an obvious change in US-China diplomacy by virtue of the Soviet threat in particular. The strategic narrative canonized in the literature cannot be taken as a theoretical claim explaining rapprochement in a causal way. Instead, it was a social narrative articulated by American statesmen, and it needed to be explored accordingly. Chapter 6 focused on the normative-institutional estrangement of the Nixon-administration from traditional ways of thinking about, and practicing, US foreign policy. Reliant on his distance from Wilsonian norms and the American bureaucracy, Kissinger expressed an alternative purpose for American foreign policy in terms of *realpolitik*. The chapter also discussed the back-and-forth of unilateral gestures and messaging through which China invited a high-level American emissary to Beijing. Chapter 7 discussed in detail the pioneering diplomatic encounters between Kissinger and Zhou during the July and October trips in 1971. It was argued that though substantive differences abound, the two diplomats converge in accepting the un-Americanness of the Nixon-administration and its exceptional political agency in changing relations between the US and China. This deep similarity established the two diplomats as strangers interested in keeping the conversation going. The chapter also demonstrated that *realpolitik* is the reference through which Kissinger reports these encounters to Nixon. This conceptualization had to do with the prior conceptualization of the un-American concern with the international equilibrium.

The research questions posed on page 9 can be answered both theoretically and empirically. The substantive purposes making diplomatic relations necessary rather than unnecessary (sub-question 1a) are contextual. Theoretically, they relate to the nature of a particular relationship as the two parties make sense of what is reasonable to do with the other by virtue of their respective systemic

and national interests. The thesis argued that there is no inherent purpose of diplomacy that overrides these political deliberations. Empirically, it was the inception of a new systemic reason inaugurated in a language of *realpolitik* that rendered the American national interest compatible with improved relations with China. The necessity of diplomacy with China was forged in the Nixon-administration's un-American concern with the international equilibrium.

The institutional/bureaucratic conditions required for establishing diplomatic relations (sub-question 2a) put a premium on distance from entrenched norms and practices in the machinery of government. Theoretically, this is so because the bureaucracy makes possible the maintenance of diplomatic relations rather than their initiation. The norms and practices informing its operation tend to militate against diplomatic change from within. Empirically, it was isolation from the American bureaucracy that fueled the conceptualization of a new US China policy, as well as its subsequent enactment *via* secrecy.

Finally, the social-practical conditions in which deliberating over diplomatic relations is both possible and necessary (sub-questions 2a and 2b) are characterized by estrangement. Theoretically, the making strange of established norms and practices fuels a need to creatively think about diplomacy and its purpose in a relationship (necessity), as well as a need to socially separate from the institutional loci generating and reproducing such established norms and practices (possibility). Empirically, this estrangement stemmed from the social distance the Nixon-administration nurtured from the American bureaucracy. It was in this context that thinking about China in radically new ways was necessary and possible.

8.3. Contributions

a. Diplomatic normalization as process of change rather than outcome

Normalization is commonly understood as marking the restoration of diplomatic relations and the mutual extension of official recognition. This focus on outcome rather than process is problematic. It means that empirical analyses take for granted that the rationale for normalizing relations in a particular case is *readily contained* in bilateral changes taking place prior to it. Once normalization as an outcome is imbued with social significance, it is projected back into the past. Instead of this retrospective procedure, this thesis demonstrated that pioneering diplomatic encounters, which are the inaugural steps towards normalization, do not testify to a great convergence in foreign policy positions. There is an embryonic interest in bilateral diplomacy at the start, but why and how it continues and with what intensity is incumbent upon its participants to negotiate. Normalization reappraised as a process implies a commitment to paying attention to the difficulty diplomats face in struggling through their differences for the sake of dialogue. If normalization happens at the end of this process, it is not necessarily because differences are overcome, but because the two sides commit to talking with one another to mediate over them. An approach dedicated to process is better able to make sense of such mediation than an approach fixated on outcome.

b. Estrangement as a locus of intervention and method of negotiation

The social-contextual character of diplomacy and its necessity is readily accepted in post-classical approaches to diplomacy.⁷³⁶ Difference and estrangement are regularly implicated in separating

⁷³⁶ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann, “The Future of Diplomacy”; K. M. Fierke, *Diplomatic Interventions: Conflict and Change in a Globalizing World*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Hopf, “Change in International Practices.”

political communities over which diplomacy is meant to mediate.⁷³⁷ This thesis explored estrangement as a locus of intervention and a method of negotiation. It is a locus of intervention from which a particular state of affairs can be made strange and its practical purpose problematized. It is a method of negotiation because it helps establish common space between interlocutors speaking on behalf of different political communities. Not only was Kissinger's estrangement from America productive of a new systemic reason in which improved ties with China became desirable, he estranged US foreign policy and its historical record in diplomatic encounters with Zhou to carve out a basic commonality required to propel the conversation forward. It is reasonable to expect that practices of estrangement are detectable in diplomatic encounters not limited to the empirical case of this thesis. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent the framework can travel to other contexts in which erstwhile enemies embark on the road to normalize their relations.

c. Undoing the myth of a strategic entente underpinning US-China rapprochement

This thesis was inspired in large part by a particular current in IR focused on busting founding myths in the discipline, a practice targeted at both contemporary and more historical narratives.⁷³⁸ Outside this thesis, it is a practice to which this author already attempted to contribute in a modest way.⁷³⁹ The empirical puzzle in this thesis grew out of a sense of disturbance while reading of the

⁷³⁷ Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*; Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*.

⁷³⁸ Andreas Osiander, "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth," *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (2001): 251–87, <https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180151140577>; Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, "The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths That Your Teachers Still Tell You about 1648 and 1919," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (May 2011): 735–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829811401459>; L. H. M. Ling, "Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist Dialectics and the 'China Threat,'" *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2013): 549–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051200054X>.

⁷³⁹ Akos Kopper and Tamas Peragovics, "Overcoming the Poverty of Western Historical Imagination: Alternative Analogies for Making Sense of the South China Sea Conflict," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 2 (June 2019): 360–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066118780996>.

sense of obviousness in the mainstream literature on US-China rapprochement. The meaning of this historical period is still anchored to a strategic entente having brought the two sides together by offsetting the mutual antagonism evident in the relationship for two decades. It makes it seem like the convergence occurred due to a tectonic shift in world politics, and that normalization was a self-evident outcome generated by this shift. The thesis contributed by deconstructing this narrative. It demonstrated that this process was not preordained to lead to improved ties, the seeds of success were not planted in advance, and that the Soviet threat was not an objective cause of rapprochement. If anything, it was a point of reference used in American discourse to *manipulate* China's interest in rapprochement. Undoing this myth was a way to legitimize a critical reappraisal of this historical period, and to indicate that despite an abundant literature on it much remains to be said about how and why US-China rapprochement came to be.

8.4. *Limitations*

a. Asymmetrical empirical analysis

The empirical analysis focused overwhelmingly on the US side of rapprochement. It reconstructed changes in American perspective and motivations leading up to and informing the decision to seek improved ties with China. This makes for a lopsided picture. In addition to the explanation offered in the introduction (pages 11-20), this asymmetry was due to a number of factors. First, access to Chinese materials and insufficient familiarity with the Chinese language were key technical obstacles that made it difficult to properly integrate the Chinese perspective. Therefore, the thesis relied on available English-language publications that discussed internal deliberations taking place in the Chinese Communist Party prior to rapprochement.⁷⁴⁰

Second, the difference in American and Chinese political systems makes it less likely that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai mirrored their American counterparts in becoming *revolutionaries on the inside* of government by going against accepted orthodoxy in Chinese foreign policy. This is not to say that the framework is entirely useless in making sense of changes in Chinese perspective. The decades-long struggle against US imperialism still needed to be *estranged* by Chinese policymakers to create space for deliberating over rapprochement with Washington. Indeed, the series of reports submitted by the four marshals in 1969 on Chinese foreign policy are potentially a key source to examine. Lüthi, for instance, detects the appearance of “non-conformist ideas” in the fourth report submitted in September 1969, which raised the possible desirability of talking

⁷⁴⁰ Chapter 9 on ‘The Sino-American Rapprochement, 1969-1972’ in Chen Jian’s book discusses in detail the Chinese perspective in the run-up to rapprochement. Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*.

with the American government.⁷⁴¹ Still, the difference in political systems will have to be factored in when applying the framework to the Chinese case.

Third, and most importantly, the asymmetry is a *logical consequence* of the empirical argument put forward in this thesis. It was argued that the impetus for rapprochement came from the US side, and not from an objective transformation of Chinese foreign policy engendered by the Soviet threat. Furthermore, a key obstacle in improving ties was the absence of US recognition of the PRC and its involvement in Taiwan's status. From China's perspective, it was American foreign policy that fueled the abnormal state of affairs in the bilateral relationship. Zhou stressed to Kissinger in their talks that while the American diplomat is welcome in Beijing the Chinese diplomat *cannot go* to Washington because the US-China relationship itself is asymmetrical. Therefore, the asymmetry in empirical discussion reflects the *discrepancy in responsibility* for sustaining a diplomatically abnormal *status quo* between the US and China prior to rapprochement. Because the change that *mattered* for US-China relations happened primarily in Washington, the thesis reconstructed the transformation of the American perspective. The necessity and possibility of normalization were due to the Nixon-administration's un-American ways of thinking about and practicing US foreign policy.

b. Mismatch between analytical framework and empirical analysis

There is a clear mismatch between the framework as conceptualized in chapter 4 and the empirical analysis presented across chapters 5-6-7. The framework assumed a linear, chronological process starting with estrangement, continuing with conceptualization, and concluding with enactment. This assumption is untenable as the empirical discussion *fragmented* the framework in two key

⁷⁴¹ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Restoring Chaos to History: Sino-Soviet-American Relations, 1969," *The China Quarterly* 210 (June 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574101200046X>.

respects. First, the stage of conceptualization made it seem like diplomatic actors must have a solid understanding prior to dialogue of their joint reasons for normalization. The empirical discussion demonstrated that the common interest in dialogue is no more than *embryonic* at this stage. What was *mutually accepted* between Washington and Beijing was the desire to talk about differences that divide the two sides. The framework implies that it is *this prior conceptualization* that is enacted in the third stage. This is clearly not the case.

The second way in which the empirical discussion fragments the framework follows from the first one. Because the stage of enactment is meaningless as implementing that which is conceptualized prior to it *via* estrangement, the final stage of normalization is of a different nature. Chapter 7 showed that enactment is *itself a stage of estrangement and conceptualization*. Specifically, Kissinger and Zhou enact diplomatic dialogue by estranging understandings and conceptualizing new ones in their stead. This is a fully relational and intersubjective endeavor, and it cannot be exhausted by reference to the prior conceptualizations and meanings the two speakers bring to the conversation. One correction to make, therefore, is that while there is a *unilateral* estrangement and conceptualization leading up to the diplomatic encounter, the stage of enactment is essentially a *bilateral* exercise in estranging and conceptualizing meanings for dialogue to continue.

8.5. *Further research directions and empirical cases*

In this thesis, the framework was set up *not specifically* with the US-China empirical case in mind. The mismatch between the framework and the case study discussed above is testimony that the implicit ambition of the framework is to be more broadly applicable. The necessity and possibility of diplomacy as conditions of emergence are potentially useful for assessing why and how diplomatic change comes about in a particular context. The three stages of the framework likewise lend themselves to a general analytical lens through which the shift from a diplomatically abnormal state of affairs to a diplomatically normal one takes place. Indeed, the ambition of this dissertation is to serve as a springboard for thinking conceptually about diplomatic normalization, but also for a wider variety of empirical cases to be explored with the framework. To lay the groundwork in this direction, the following issues are flagged and discussed in some detail. The purpose of doing so is not to clear every problem in anticipation of this kind of broadening of the agenda. Not only is there no space to do this properly, but much of this broadening can only be assessed *in the practice* of employing the framework to new cases. Having said so, the issues to be discussed are too important to leave unaddressed, even if the answers given at this stage are necessarily of a tentative character.

The question of applicability invites a consideration of factors likely to influence the ways in which *any* analytical framework can be employed. It is important to assess whether the framework is contaminated by assumptions that creep in because of the initial empirical context, methodological decisions, or the philosophy of science considerations informing the process of theorization. These may lead to built-in biases constraining the ability to cast the empirical net as wide as possible. This would imply that the framework is shackled by its very conditions of emergence, arresting its

analytical purchase prematurely. For instance, if the logic in which the concepts are arranged in the framework of diplomatic normalization bears the blueprint of the particularity of US-China rapprochement, then this move from innovation to a general approach is challenging. Though not to be taken lightly, these problems are quite mundane. On the one hand, whether an approach works well or not cannot be decided on its merits alone. Much depends on the specifics of the case and the way in which the approach is put to use. Because it is normal for different empirical cases to *perform differently* within the same framework, the question of applicability is as much about *finding the right fit* as about the conceptual setting itself. On the other, analytical frameworks tend to emerge in response to a particular *problématique*, either theoretical or empirical. This sets the stage for theorization, but it informs the framework in fundamental ways and makes it vulnerable during its re-appropriation later on. The story of securitization theory illuminates this predicament. Though widely touted as revolutionizing the field of security studies, the process of securitization continues to draw a litany of criticism ranging from empirical applicability,⁷⁴² bias towards the speech act,⁷⁴³ to charges of a racist intellectual legacy.⁷⁴⁴ But far from spelling the end of the framework, this kind of critique is the very condition in which the approach changes and reproduces itself.

What are the factors likely to impact the empirical applicability of the framework of diplomatic normalization? First, normalization is associated with the first diplomat theorized by Der

⁷⁴² Claire Wilkinson, “The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitization Theory Useable Outside Europe?,” *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 1 (March 2007): 5–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010607075964>.

⁷⁴³ Lene Hansen, “The Little Mermaid’s Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 285–306, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290020501>.

⁷⁴⁴ Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, “Is Securitization Theory Racist? Civilizationism, Methodological Whiteness, and Antiblack Thought in the Copenhagen School,” *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 1 (February 2020): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010619862921>.

Derian.⁷⁴⁵ Being a first diplomat means *starting a relationship anew in a conceptual sense*. It means putting existing contacts on a new footing, or initiating a new relationship from scratch. In both cases, normalization is *irrational* at its beginning, and its success depends on the ability of diplomatic agents to make the case for the rationality of the enterprise lurking behind it. The framework is able, therefore, to account for cases of normalization that do not lead to a full-scale transformation of a relationship. Developments between the US and North Korea in 2000 are an illustration. Though its participants did not manage to reboot bilateral ties, the framework is still helpful for sketching the effort. Importantly, direct talks between the two sides were as consequential as in the case of US-China rapprochement. Vice-Marshall Jo Myong-rok visited Washington in October 2000, which concluded with a joint statement stressing that

“neither would have hostile intent toward the other and confirmed the commitment of both governments to make every effort in the future to build a new relationship free from past enmity.”⁷⁴⁶

Not only was this the first tangible signal that the US accepts North Korea’s right to exist, the text construes the encounter as marking an unmistakable rupture with ‘past enmity.’ This indicates that continuity has to be suspended for a new kind of diplomatic practice to take root. Subsequently, the return visit to Pyongyang by Secretary of State Madelaine Albright in October 2000 proved key in dispelling long-standing myths about North Korea. Initially seeing Kim Jong Il as “strange, moody, and hypersensitive,” Albright left Pyongyang viewing him instead as “practical, pragmatic, decisive, and non-ideological.”⁷⁴⁷ This confirms the role diplomats play in estranging old notions of the other, and embracing new ones to support the continuation of dialogue. These

⁷⁴⁵ James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 144.

⁷⁴⁶ Siegfried S. Hecker, “Lessons Learned from the North Korean Nuclear Crises,” *North Korean Review* 8, no. 1 (April 1, 2012): 49, <https://doi.org/10.3172/NKR.8.1.136>.

⁷⁴⁷ Secretary Albright’s October 25 Bilateral in Seoul with Japanese FM Kono, December 3, 2000. Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20421-national-security-archive-doc-15-cable-state>.

are clear parallels with US-China rapprochement, but a key difference is that reconciliation between Washington and Pyongyang eventually fell through. After the Bush administration lumped North Korea together with Iran and Iraq in the axis of evil in 2001,⁷⁴⁸ the politics of “diplomatic paralysis” returned to the scene.⁷⁴⁹ This was something of a *counter*-estrangement that undermine the Clinton administration’s constructive engagement with North Korea.⁷⁵⁰ Therefore, success is not guaranteed in starting a relationship anew. Unless the direction of normalization gains sufficient traction, there is always a possibility that guardians of the old direction throw it out as an abnormality.

Second, the process theorized in the dissertation emphasizes the change-inducing ability of human actors in improving interstate relations. It focuses on diplomatic agents involved in normalizing an abnormal state of affairs through the stages of the analytical framework. Moving forward, this focus on agency has to be complemented with attention to the role *political and social power* plays in who is positioned to conceptualize diplomatic change and turn it into policy. The case of Kissinger and Nixon was unique in this regard. The success of their endeavor depended on secrecy first and foremost, but this secrecy had to do with their privileged position and ability to vindicate for themselves the steering of policy towards the PRC. Diplomats in most other countries are unlikely to be able to sidestep their bureaucracies and engage in fully clandestine interactions with their enemies. Icebreaking meetings between long-standing adversaries may take place behind the watchful eye of the global public, but it seems exceptional for the *domestic contestation* of a radical change in foreign policy to be fully short-circuited. This was an extraordinary feature of US-China

⁷⁴⁸ Ken Kyle, “U.S. Nationalism and the Axis of Evil: U.S. Policy and Rhetoric on North Korea,” *Humanity & Society* 25, no. 3 (August 2001): 239–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016059760102500304>.

⁷⁴⁹ Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998), 13–15.

⁷⁵⁰ Kyle, “U.S. Nationalism and the Axis of Evil,” 210.

rapprochement unlikely to be reproducible in other contexts, and the stages of estrangement and conceptualization need to capture how advocates of diplomatic change make the case for normalization *before* it turns into accepted policy. In fact, there are likely to be many *non-cases* for the framework to consider, those that fail in the face of political resistance but in which practices of estrangement and conceptualization are integral to the attempt.

The normalization of ties between the US and Cuba in 2014 is an example that succeeded despite numerous failures during the Cold War. Following the severance of official ties in 1961, back-channel negotiations were held intermittently to seek out ways of repairing the relationship. In 1963, Fidel Castro told US negotiator James Donovan that a rebooting of contacts is ultimately a *conceptual* question, to be addressed relationally:

“If any relations were to commence between the U.S. and Cuba, how would it come about and what would be involved?”⁷⁵¹

The success of these negotiations depended not simply on articulating a shared conception of the relationship, which was difficult to come by, but on making the case for reconciliation rather than hostility within domestic policy circles. LeoGrande and Kornbluh write of this struggle in terms reminiscent of the dialectic between conceptualization and estrangement stressed by the framework. Their book is a chronicle of American policy actors

“who, for more than fifty years, challenged the national security managers in successive administrations to consider the options of dialogue and engagement over the dominant U.S. approach of antagonism and estrangement.”⁷⁵²

⁷⁵¹ William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1.

⁷⁵² LeoGrande and Kornbluh, 4.

The policy of antagonism and estrangement reigned supreme for decades until the pressure for change became overwhelming in the 2010s. The American recognition of Cuba in 2014 was not due to the efforts of a few diplomatic revolutionaries on the inside of government. The transformation of the approach towards Havana came about in a piecemeal, incremental fashion, whereby the ingredients for change piled up over a longer period. But this process still needed to be managed. The absence of normalization had to be rendered strange, and diplomatic agents were forced to navigate from what used to be towards a conjecture of what is to take its place, however inchoate and tentative their sense of the latter was. In part, this estrangement came about through a resetting of historical time. In Barack Obama's statement announcing the news of diplomatic recognition in 2014, he is explicit that the two sides managed to "cut loose the shackles of the past."⁷⁵³ Once again, these articulations testify to the necessity of a normative *tabula rasa* for normalization. By relying on the framework, it is possible to trace how diplomatic agents take advantage of this vacuum torn out of historical time.

Third, the power discrepancy between states has to feature as yet another important contextual matter for the framework to consider. The cases briefly mentioned in this section all involve, first, the United States and, second, countries that are much less powerful in comparison (North Korea and Cuba). Indeed, the framework may be criticized for theorizing a diplomatic phenomenon in terms of *innovation* even though it conceals nothing more than the outsized ability of a great power to change interstate affairs according to its fancy. But the fact of power discrepancy does not negate the need on either of the two sides to build a case for diplomatic change. Hardly any foreign policy can undergo a wholesale reorientation overnight, and imposing such a new direction on a target

⁷⁵³ Quoted in William M. Leogrande, "Normalizing US-Cuba Relations: Escaping the Shackles of the Past," *International Affairs* 91, no. 3 (May 2015): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12282>.

country is even more difficult. Even if the parties involved occupy different structural positions in the international system, the relative pressures to normalize ties may equalize the underlying differences. Indeed, the case of US-China rapprochement showed a counterintuitive example in which the American superpower proved more adamant to secure China's support for normalization than the other way around.

Finally, it would be necessary to explore how the framework holds up in cases in which the US is not directly involved. The Abraham Accords of 2020 was signed between the State of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, but the term itself came to refer to diplomatic normalization between Israel and the UAE, on the one hand, and Israel and Bahrain, on the other.⁷⁵⁴ These cases would be hard for the framework to crack. For instance, the normalization between Israel and the UAE is tied specifically to an Emirati proposal seeking to thwart Israel's further annexation of the West Bank.⁷⁵⁵ The UAE essentially sought to deter Israel by holding out the promise of normal diplomatic ties in case Israel complies with its demand. Israel agreed, and though the two sides interpret differently what they agreed to, the example proved contagious and Bahrain followed suit. These countries seem to have normalized their relations in response to the "Middle East regional security complex,"⁷⁵⁶ with their interest firmly lodged in geopolitical considerations. One issue here is that this kind of narrative frames normalization in instrumental terms, whereas the framework foregrounded the autonomy of diplomacy in transforming interstate relations. Though this seems like a serious issue, it is similar to the one encountered in the literature

⁷⁵⁴ Jonathan Fulton and Roie Yellinek, "UAE-Israel Diplomatic Normalization: A Response to a Turbulent Middle East Region," *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 5 (September 3, 2021): 499–515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2021.1962200>; Yoel Guzansky and Zachary A. Marshall, "The Abraham Accords: Immediate Significance and Long-Term Implications," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 379–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1831861>.

⁷⁵⁵ Guzansky and Marshall, "The Abraham Accords," 384.

⁷⁵⁶ Fulton and Yellinek, "UAE-Israel Diplomatic Normalization."

on US-China rapprochement. In these contexts, the question is not primarily about the existence of a strategic rationale for improving ties, but rather the conceivability of this very rationale in the first place. Framed in these terms, these cases are not antithetical to the framework of diplomatic normalization. Much like the threat of the Soviet Union, the possibility of Israeli annexation may have been no more than a trigger for thinking creatively about diplomatic relations. In doing so, diplomatic actors are likely to be engaged in practices of estrangement and conceptualization, and these are processes that the analytical framework can help understand.

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