Friend, Ally, or Rival? Twitter Diplomacy as "Technosocial" Performance of National Identity

SAIF SHAHIN
American University, USA

Q. ELYSE HUANG
University of Texas at Austin, USA

Drawing on the constructivist tradition in international relations, we examine the influence of national identity—or how a nation views itself in relation to other nations—on the tweeting practices of its diplomatic missions. Our analysis focuses on the use of Twitter by U.S. missions in Britain, India, and China over a four-month period brimming with diplomatic activity: June–September 2018. We find that not only do the three U.S. missions use Twitter in vastly different ways, but that their tweeting practices reflect and reproduce the specific identities the United States professes vis-à-vis these nations: a friend to Britain, an ally to India, and a rival to China. We argue that (1) Twitter is an emergent "technosocial" arena that enables nations to perform their identities online and (2) different national identities—friend, ally, and rival—derive their meanings in and through such practices. In addition, we distinguish a variety of tweeting practices and their symbolic significance in terms of national identity performance.

Keywords: Twitter, public diplomacy, national identity, constructivism, United States, Britain, India, China

On a gloomy February day in 1804, the first coal-powered steam locomotive chugged its way from the small Welsh village of Pen-y-daren to Abercynon, nine miles away, ringing in the industrial revolution and—simultaneously—kickstarting the era of industrial pollution (Shifrin, 2014). Two centuries later, Britain remains among the world's biggest per capita emitters of industrial pollutants, at a rate almost the same as China's (Pettinger, 2017). Yet, it was in Beijing, not London, where in 2008 a U.S. mission decided to install an air quality monitor and broadcast hourly readings via Twitter (Chen, Tu, & Zheng, 2017).

The adoption of Twitter and other social networking sites (SNSs) by foreign ministries and missions has attracted considerable academic interest in recent years (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Pamment, 2013; Zaharna, 2016). This is not surprising: SNSs offer diplomatic missions an unprecedented opportunity to directly connect with foreign publics and engage in to-and-fro conversations, setting into motion diverse

Saif Shahin: shahin@american.edu
Q. Elyse Huang: elyse.huang@utexas.edu

social and political phenomena. Much of the scholarship in this field has, however, assumed an instrumentalist approach, concerned chiefly with whether or not foreign missions—particularly U.S. missions abroad—are employing SNSs "effectively" for self-promotion and influencing international public opinion. Many studies have found that SNS use is not optimized for such ends and recommend generic, decontextualized remedies for expanding "two-way communication" with foreign publics, drawn from theories in public relations and marketing (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Metzgar & Lu, 2015; Sevin & Ingenhoff, 2018; Uysal, Schroeder, & Taylor, 2012).

But as the U.S. decision to use Twitter to draw attention to pollution in China but not in Britain indicates, foreign missions do not rely on SNSs only for self-promotion or influencing public opinion. Moreover, their SNS use is inherently localized and relational, based on the nature of bilateral ties that, in turn, exist within the broader structure of international relations. In other words, foreign missions' use of Twitter and other SNSs is not simply an "independent variable" meant to influence foreign public opinion and, by extension, the policies of foreign nations (Sevin, 2017). Rather, it is itself the outcome of social and political forces that shape international relations as an everyday practice (Jackson, 2019).

In this study, we advance an alternative approach that pulls away from the instrumentalism of extant research and turns attention to explaining why foreign missions use Twitter in particular ways within particular nations. Drawing on the constructivist tradition in international relations, we argue that national identities underlie the use of SNSs by foreign missions (Hopf, 2002; Onuf, 2013). These identities are contextual and relational: The same nation may profess different identities vis-à-vis different nations (Wendt, 1992, 1999).[1] Therefore, our empirical focus is the use of Twitter by U.S. missions in Britain, India, and China, three nations with which the United States professes very different relationships. In the strict constructivist tradition, we do not assume relations among nations to be natural; instead, we view them as social facts that are constructed in practice (Ruggie, 2002). Our research, therefore, also aims to understand how different types of bilateral relationships are produced and reproduced through different social—or, more precisely, "technosocial"—practices on Twitter, even as they recursively shape the practice of tweeting itself.

Our analysis has both theoretical and practical implications. First, we demonstrate that foreign missions do not use SNSs only to influence foreign public opinion, a common assumption in public diplomacy scholarship. Their SNS use is shaped by a variety of contextual, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory interests, driven by national identities that are relational in character. We argue that studies focusing on the effectiveness of SNS use for public diplomacy should also take these identities into consideration. In addition, we distinguish a series of tweeting practices and their significations in terms of identity construction. These practices are technosocial in character: Their capacity to construct national identity in terms of social relations is enabled as well as constrained by the technological affordances of an SNS. As these practices and their significations diffuse and become more widely pervasive, they could also become yardsticks for nations to interpret each other's intents and actions. In other words, these tweeting practices could be generative of international relations themselves as "systems of meaning and signification" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 43).

---

[1] Some public diplomacy scholars also use the term *national identity* when referring to a nation's "brand identity." Our conceptualization of national identity, as discussed in detail below, is quite different.

Public Diplomacy 2.0

Gilboa (2008) defined public diplomacy as an approach in which "state and non-state actors use the media and other channels of communication to influence public opinion in foreign societies" (p. 58). The surge in popularity of new information and communication technologies, especially SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so on, has in recent years brought about a "paradigm shift" in the field (Pamment, 2013, p. 3). Practitioners of Public Diplomacy 2.0 (PD 2.0) can connect directly and build social relationships with citizens of other nations on a mass scale. Moreover, they can hear back from foreign nationals and engage them in real-time conversations (Zaharna, 2010).

The U.S. diplomatic establishment was among the first converts to PD 2.0. As early as 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice talked about emerging technologies as "a great way to connect with millions of new people" around the world (Rice, 2006, para. 20). The U.S. State Department joined Twitter in October 2007 and, as of September 2019, has more than 5 million followers. An incomplete list on its website shows that the department owns more than 800 social media accounts through its missions worldwide on an assortment of platforms including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, Google+, and blogging websites (U.S. Department of State, 2017).

Research on U.S. PD 2.0 can be divided into two overlapping waves. Initially, scholars were keen to explain the benefits of social media and encourage U.S. policymakers to turn to Facebook and Twitter for public diplomacy and the exercise of soft power, especially following the Bush-era "war on terror" that had severely undermined U.S. "moral leadership" (Wichowski, 2013; Zaharna, 2010). Although there is a recognition here, especially in Zaharna (2010), that slick media messages do not make up for poor policymaking when it comes to "winning hearts and minds," the general thrust of this scholarship is that "nation-branding" and "image management" through SNSs is a necessary exercise, even if it is meant to ensure that well-intentioned policy changes are better understood.

Once it became clear that no more encouragement was necessary, scholars turned their attention to empirical analyses of the nature of social media use and its "effectiveness." Effectiveness is typically understood as dialogue and "two-way communication" with foreign publics (Sevin & Ingenhoff, 2018). For instance, Metzgar and Lu (2015) looked at the social media posts of U.S. embassies in China, Japan, and South Korea. They found that even though SNSs offer tremendous potential for interaction, U.S. embassies' use of SNSs "remains overwhelmingly unilateral, with one-way messaging the norm and instances of engagement with the target publics exceedingly rare" (Metzgar & Lu, 2015, p. 204). Bjola and Jiang's (2015) comparison of U.S., EU, and Japan's social media posts in China also indicated that "digital diplomacy is being primarily used as an instrument of information dissemination and much less for engaging the audience in a two-way dialogue" (p. 87).

These studies suggest that even as the field of PD 2.0 research has grown and matured over the past decade, it has maintained an instrumentalist ethos. Scholars were initially concerned with outlining the benefits of SNSs for "winning hearts and minds"; they are now anxious about whether or not SNSs are being used for engaging foreign publics in "two-way communication," viewed in public relations research as the optimal means of changing public opinion in one's favor. But in Grunig and Hunt's (1984) classic typology of public relations models, even two-way communication is of two types: *asymmetric*, in which dialogic

strategies are used instrumentally to change public opinion for one's own benefit; and *symmetric*, in which dialogue is meant to develop a shared understanding of common concerns to form a mutually beneficial relationship. The key difference is that symmetric two-way communication entails a willingness to change oneself, if need be, for mutual benefit, as opposed to asymmetric two-way communication, in which the goal is to make the (foreign) public change their opinion for one's own benefit.

A Constructivist Approach

The materialist tradition in international relations theory is premised on the supposition that the "anarchical" structure of world politics—that is, the absence of a formal authority—either predisposes relations between nations to be conflictual (Waltz, 1979) or forces nations to build institutions such as the United Nations that can lead to cooperation (Keohane, 1984). In contrast, the constructivist tradition suggests that nations are not predisposed to be in either conflict or cooperation; instead, international relations are constructed in and through symbolic interactions (Hopf, 2002; Onuf, 2013).

Although constructivists do not deny the existence of an international structure that bears on how nations act, they also view nations as subjects or actors, endowed with agency, that take actions reflexively. Wendt (1992) argues that nations, as actors in the international arena, "act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the *meanings* [emphasis added] that the objects have for them" (pp. 396–397). These meanings are social: collectively held beliefs about the history, values, and motivations of different actors in relation to each other that emerge in social interactions between these actors. They form the basis of each actor's identity, or "an inherently social definition of the actor grounded in the theories which actors collectively hold about themselves and one another and which constitute the structure of the social world" (p. 398).

Nations, as actors in the international arena, therefore "act" on the basis of their national identity in relation to other nations. If two nations identify each other as "friends"—for instance, the United States and Britain—they would not be alarmed if one of them amasses more weapons: Each would see the other's armaments as adding to its own security. But if two nations identify each other as "rivals"—for instance, the United States and China—any weapons build-up by one would make the other anxious. Thus, neither conflict nor cooperation is the natural predisposition of international relations; both are possible outcomes of the meanings that nations hold vis-à-vis each other. Moreover, these meanings do not exist a priori; instead, they are made by actors in and through social interaction. When the United States expresses alarm at China amassing weapons or finding a new ally but is at ease with or even encourages Britain to do the same, its actions both reflect and reproduce relations of "friendship" and "rivalry" with these two nations, respectively. In addition, this process (re)produces the meanings of friendship and rivalry as well, as relational possibilities between nations and, by extension, as identity possibilities for a nation vis-à-vis other nations. Such meaning-making processes thus come to have productive power: They "situate ordinary practices of life and define the social fields of action that are imaginable and possible" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 56).

A key point of divergence between materialist and constructivist positions relates to their conceptualization of "national interest." In the materialist tradition, all nations are supposed to have the same interests, such as national security, at all times and in all contexts, even though different nations

differ in their capacity to achieve those interests (Mearsheimer, 2001). But constructivists view interests as functions of identities; they vary according to contexts and relationships. As Wendt (1992) notes, "Actors do not have a 'portfolio' of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations" (p. 398).

This distinction is crucial for understanding the different implications of materialist and constructivist schools of thought for public diplomacy. In the materialist tradition, the practice of public diplomacy would be pretty much the same all around—aimed at influencing the attitudes and opinions of people in foreign nations to make them favorable toward oneself, which in turn would put pressure on the governments of those people to do the same (Sevin, 2017). Although few scholars say so explicitly, this is the default "paradigm" within which much of public diplomacy research—including PD 2.0 scholarship—appears to operate (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Gilboa, 2008).

In contrast, constructivists would view public diplomacy as taking place *in situ*, shaped by a nation's identity vis-à-vis other nations. As a nation's identity—and concomitant interests—would vary according to its relationships, the practice of public diplomacy, including PD 2.0, across different nations would also vary, reflecting and reproducing those differences. This perspective is marginal but not altogether absent from public diplomacy scholarship. Zaharna (2009) proposes a "relational framework" for public diplomacy in which "building relationships is not a means for enhancing individual national images or policies, but an end in itself" (p. 91). Although her conceptualization of the term *relational* does not necessarily imply contextual, its operationalization as micro-level "specific actions" or "symbolic gestures" demonstrating reciprocity and mutuality does make such public diplomacy efforts contextual in practice (see also Brown, 2013; Yun, 2012). Some empirical PD 2.0 studies have also elicited evidence of context dependence. In their analysis of U.S., EU, and Japan's "digital diplomacy" in China, Bjola and Jiang (2015) primarily rue the absence of "two-way dialogue," but they also note that "the nature of the bilateral relationship between countries also influences the way in which social media is being used for diplomatic purposes" (p. 87).

America's Bilateral Relationships

United States and Britain

After the 13 colonies broke away from Britain in 1784 and formed the United States of America, the two nations remained at odds for at least another century. The "great rapprochement" came toward the end of the 19th century as British and American foreign policies became harmonious. They fought as allies in the two World Wars and remained allies all through the Cold War (Adams, 2005). As political, economic, and military cooperation grew, Britain became America's most important partner in Europe (Dobson, 1995). Since the Cold War, Britain has participated in U.S.-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and was an active supporter of the so-called war on terror (Wilson, 2017). Scholars such as Schulze (2018) have argued that this "special relationship" is built on shared values and ideologies such as capitalism and liberal democracy. Recently, questions have been raised about the value of post-Brexit Britain as America's strategic and economic partner in Europe (Politi, 2018). But during his summer 2018 visit, U.S. President Donald Trump reaffirmed the "special relationship," stating that the two nations have jointly made contributions to the world order and therefore "must never cease to be united" (Politico, 2018, para. 4).

United States and India

After achieving independence from Britain in 1947, India joined America's rival camp as an ally of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It was also a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Relations between India and America were cold during the Cold War, but began to warm up after the Soviet Union's collapse, especially as India underwent economic liberalization and started opening its immense market to international capital (van de Wetering, 2016). The two nations have also deepened defense cooperation, mainly in response to their mutual suspicion of China, India's regional rival (Tourangbam, 2018). U.S. President Barack Obama described the U.S.–India relationship as "a defining partnership of the century ahead" (Hindu, 2010, para. 25). His successor, Trump, has recognized India as a major defense partner and emphasized cooperation on issues such as maritime security and counterterrorism (White House, 2017). However, Chacko (2014) argues that U.S. policymakers' attempt to construct a "special relationship" with India would not be successful as India prioritizes autonomy and self-sufficiency and has its own vision of what the world order should look like.

United States and China

On the one hand, China is America's biggest trading partner (Gray, 2018). On the other hand, the two nations do not agree on a range of political issues. In the past seven decades, the U.S.–China relationship has been tested by the Korean War, the Cold War, China's political turbulence and economic reform, and regional security issues such as the North Korea nuclear crisis. Scholars have argued that U.S. policies toward China are a mix of cooperative and hedging strategies (Garrison & Wall, 2016). As expectations of China adopting the Western democratic system failed, the United States has been arranging alliances in the Pacific region to balance China's influence (Nye, 2018). In recent years, even trade and commerce have become fractious domains as the world's two biggest economies compete for markets in East Asia and Africa. President Trump, who during his election campaign had blamed China for the bilateral trade deficit and threatened to levy hefty tariffs on Chinese imports, came good on his promise in late 2018. But Nye (2018) maintains that despite these challenges, the two nations will continue to cooperate on issues of mutual concern to maintain global financial stability.

As these brief accounts suggest, the United States has very different bilateral relationships with Britain, India, and China. Drawing on the constructivist tradition, we expected that these differences would bear on the PD 2.0 practices of U.S. missions in these nations. Therefore, our empirical analysis focuses on the following research question:

RQ1:   *How do differences in U.S. relations with Britain, India, and China influence the PD 2.0 practices of U.S. missions in these nations?*

Method

To answer our research question, we decided to collect all Twitter posts, or tweets, from all of the official accounts of U.S. missions in Britain, India, and China over a four-month period: June to September 2018. We chose to focus on Twitter for two reasons. First, as we expected tweeting practices

to be technosocial in character, it was necessary to focus on a common social media platform for all three U.S. missions to ensure comparability. Second, Twitter is freely used and counted among the most popular SNSs in Britain and India (Statista, 2019). Although the service was banned in Mainland China in 2009, millions of Chinese Internet users also get around the firewall to log into Twitter through virtual private networks (Chen et al., 2017). The U.S. mission, while extensively using China's domestic SNSs such as Weibo, also uses Twitter to leverage the platform's global presence and its uncensored environment. The period of our study is significant for U.S. relations with all three nations. President Trump made his first visit to Britain in July following a NATO summit in Brussels. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the United States in June. America's top diplomat, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, also visited China in June. Pompeo's visit came after the first-ever meeting between a U.S. president and the Supreme Leader of North Korea, a key Chinese ally.

We identified six official Twitter accounts of the U.S. mission in Britain: @USAmbUK, @USAinUK, @USAinUKConsular, @USAinUKpress, @USAinScotland, and @USAinNI. The first is used by the U.S. ambassador, the second by the embassy in London, the third and fourth by the consular and press offices of the embassy, and the last two by the consulates in Scotland and Northern Ireland, respectively. In India, we identified six accounts: @USAmbIndia, @USAndIndia, @USAndMumbai, @USAndChennai, @USAndKolkata, and @USAndHyderabad, respectively. The first is used by the ambassador, the second by the embassy in Delhi, and the rest by consulates in Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad. In China, the U.S. mission has only one Twitter account, @USA_China_Talk, used by the embassy in Beijing.[2]

All tweets posted by these accounts during the study period were mined with the help of the cloud-based social data mining platform Netlytic.org, which uses Twitter's REST API v1.1 (Gruzd, 2019). In total, 2,648 tweets were collected from Britain, 5,102 from India, and 296 from China. As the majority of tweets from China were in Mandarin, the second author, who is a native Mandarin speaker and also fluent in English, manually translated them before the analysis. A small number of tweets from India were in regional languages and were translated using Google Translate.

We relied on critical technocultural discourse analysis, a technique pioneered by Brock (2012, 2018), to examine the tweets. This technique was selected because it "integrates an analysis of the technological artifact and user discourse, framed by cultural theory, to unpack semiotic and material connections between form, function, belief, and meaning" (Brock, 2018, p. 1012). Specifically, it recognizes that online discourse is not just "text" in a traditional sense, but is produced as a technological artifact and incorporates algorithmic features that bring new layers of meaning to it. The analysis therefore pays attention to both textual and technological significations of discourse, and attempts to understand how they reinforce each other within particular cultural contexts.

Our analysis proceeded in multiple stages. We started by looking at tweets from the U.S. mission in India for two reasons. First, this was the largest of the three samples. Second, the U.S. relationship with India is relatively more nuanced: The two countries believe they share a number of values and

---

[2] The U.S. consulate is Guangzhou operates another account, @Guangzhou_Air, that simply tweets hourly pollution levels in the city. We decided not to include this account in our study.

interests, but they also differ with each other on several issues (Chacko, 2014). We therefore expected this sample to provide us with a broader range of coding categories that would prove useful for analyzing the other two samples as well. The first author read the tweets from India and manually coded them based on emergent categories such as tweet type (policy-oriented or business-oriented), theme (e.g., commerce, education, defense), tone (e.g., celebratory, appreciative, concerned), as well as technological features such as replies, retweets, and mentions. The analysis also sought to understand how different coding categories complemented or reinforced one another. After reaching saturation, we discussed the categories and their examples.

Next, the first author coded tweets from Britain, the second-biggest sample. Several previously emerged categories were found to be relevant for this sample. In addition, the coding yielded some new categories, including account type (ambassador, embassy, consular) and personalization. Finally, tweets from China were coded for extant as well as emergent categories, such as historical tweets. To make sure that the coding scheme was uniformly followed across the three samples, the first author went back to the samples from India and Britain to look for the presence of categories that had emerged in subsequent samples. Some tweets were recoded in this round; for instance, tweets from India were recoded for account type and personalization (which had emerged in the Britain sample) and both India and Britain samples were recoded for historical tweets (which had emerged in the China sample). Both authors once again discussed the coding categories and consolidated them to develop an analytical framework based on relationally oriented national identities.

America as Friend

"As a New Yorker, I'm a huge fan of Lancashire-born, Thomas Cole, founder of #HudsonRiverSchool, & arguably the greatest landscape artist of his generation. @NationalGallery are showing Cole's art-you have to see it!" This tweet by U.S. Ambassador Woody Johnson, fusing the personal with the historical as he exhorted his Twitter followers to check out the paintings of an early 19th-century artist, exquisitely illustrates the nature of the "special relationship" between the United States and Britain and how Twitter reflects as well as reproduces this relationship.

Johnson tweeted often during the period of our study—393 times to be exact. Whereas most of his tweets were standard diplomatic fare, related to defense deals and business expos, he also brought a personal touch to his posts. Several tweets, for instance, reflected his passion for art, sports, and traveling. In one such tweet, he asks, "Can anyone guess where I am?" while displaying him standing next a famous bull sculpture outside a ring in Birmingham. He frequently tweeted support for English teams and players participating in international competitions, such as the 2018 Football World Cup ("Come on England! #ENGTUN"). Every now and then, he also referred to his own New York roots, like he did in his tweet about the painter Cole. Even though he was using the official ambassadorial Twitter account (@USambUK), it was as if he was tweeting to personal friends. This personalization, an affordance of Twitter whose impact has also been visible in other domains of public life (Lee & Oh, 2012), indicated and simultaneously reinforced his identification—and thereby that of the United States—as a "friend" of Britain (see Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in Tweeting Practices of U.S. Missions in Britain, India, and China.

Dimension	Britain	India	China
Type of relationship with United States	Friend	Ally	Rival
Primary type of tweets	Policy-oriented	Event-oriented	Policy-oriented
Dominant theme	Defense	Commerce, education	Threat
Dominant concern	External (common security concerns, e.g., Russia, Iran, North Korea)	Internal (environment, rights of sexual minorities, religious freedom)	Internal (lack of democracy and human rights)
Historical references	Wars fought together, especially WWII	None	Instances of rights abuse (e.g., Tiananmen Square)
Ambassador's account	Personalized tweets	Formal tweets	None
Embassy vs. consular accounts	Majority of tweets from embassy account	Majority of tweets from consular accounts	No consular accounts
Retweets/reposts of top U.S. policymakers	High	Low	Very high

The same relational identity was evident in the difference in the proportion of tweets posted by the U.S. embassy in London (@USAinUK) vis-à-vis the consulates in Scotland (@USAinScotland) and Northern Ireland (@USAinNI). The embassy, America's main representative office in Britain, posted nearly 65% of all tweets in our sample. This is significant for two reasons. First, it indicates that the U.S. accords a high priority to this relationship. Second, it suggests that U.S. public diplomacy via Twitter in Britain stresses policy matters over day-to-day events and issues, which are more the domain of regional consulates.

Several other findings bolster this interpretation. The U.S. mission in Britain frequently retweeted America's highest policymakers and policymaking offices, reinforcing the importance of the relationship as well as its policy orientation. The State Department (@StateDept or @StateDeptSpox) was retweeted 166 times and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (@SecPompeo) himself was retweeted 62 times. The mission also retweeted President Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump) and the White House (@WhiteHouse) a total of 71 times. These retweets typically focused on global "concerns" such as Russia's influence on Europe, Iran's nuclear plans, relations with North Korea, and so on, reinforcing the notion that Britain was a close friend working with the United States on issues of the highest scope and import. To cite one example, a tweet originally from Pompeo and retweeted by the U.S. embassy reads,

> Terrorist groups, Russian acts of hybrid warfare, Iranian aggression, and many other threats all directly jeopardize the security of our people. That's why U.S. is asking all @NATO allies to increase their cooperation with partners in Africa and the Middle East.

This retweet also highlights defense and security as the cornerstone of the bilateral relationship. To be sure, a number of tweets in our sample related to commercial deals, educational exchanges, art expos, food facts, sporting events, and so on. But defense—specifically mutually reliant defense—emerged as the dominant theme. Several tweets, for instance, indicated Britain's cobelonging, alongside the United States, in NATO, a multilateral security alliance. Other tweets reminisced a long history of wars fought together by the two nations as brothers in arm. As one such tweet notes, "This year marks the 74th anniversary of Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944—most commonly known as D-Day. D-Day forged partnerships and reinforced transatlantic bonds that remain strong today. #WWII."

The U.S. mission's tweets thus socially constructed a relation of friendship—longstanding, intimate, and "special"—with Britain (Adams, 2005; Dobson, 1995; Schulze, 2018; Wilson, 2017). Episodes from the two nations' cultural and military history, a shared understanding of the dangers they face today, and cobelonging to a security alliance were mobilized to ascribe a particular identity to the United States as a social actor in the international arena in relation to Britain. But this process was not simply social; rather, it was technosocial. Twitter's algorithmic affordances, such as multimodality and retweeting, allowed Ambassador Johnson to give a personal touch to public diplomacy; they also enabled the U.S mission to display engagement with Britain at the highest levels of the U.S. administration in Washington, D.C. In this process, the abstract concept of friendship between nations also comes to acquire a particular meaning and a particular way of being operationalized. Personalized tweets, retweets of presidential and ministerial tweets, references to shared history, and so on become the concrete markers of this "type" of relationship.

America as Ally

On June 1, 2018, the U.S. embassy in Delhi (@USAndIndia) tweeted, "In symbolic nod to India, United States military renamed its @PacificCommand the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. Looking forward to higher levels of #USIndiaDefense cooperation." The wording of this tweet is at once straightforward and strange. The renaming of the Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command may have indeed been a "symbolic nod," but if symbols are to achieve their objectives—in this case, signaling India's importance for the United States, especially in the "Indo-Pacific" region—then they ought not to be seen as symbolic but as substantive measures. Calling a symbol a symbol, in other words, undercuts its symbolism.

The curious wording of this tweet illustrates the curious relationship between the United States and India and how it shapes the tweeting practices of the U.S. mission (see Table 1). On the surface, there are a number of similarities with Britain. The mission in India also has six official Twitter accounts, and they are all fairly active. Indeed, the size of the Indian tweet sample we gathered in four months was nearly twice the size of the British sample. The general tone of the tweets was positive and, at times, celebratory (e.g., "Happy Independence Day!" or "We celebrated #WorldOceansDay2018 at #DostiHouse"). Also like in Britain, a number of tweets in India focused on the theme of defense and security.

But the similarities end there. An interesting difference was the substantially low proportion of tweets posted by the main embassy in India, 28%, compared with 65% in Britain. The majority of tweets were posted by regional consulates. This suggests (1) the relatively low priority that the United States accords to this relationship compared with Britain and (2) the dominance of day-to-day events and

administrative issues over matters of policy. Lower numbers of retweets of top policymakers and policymaking institutions in Washington, D.C.—from Trump and the White House (nine retweets) to Pompeo (49 retweets) and the State Department (171 retweets)—reinforce this difference. Also unlike Britain, there was almost no personalization in the posts of Ambassador Kenneth Juster, who typically tweeted about his meetings with Indian officials and ministers (e.g., "Thank you Minister Maneka Gandhi @Manekagandhibjp for an engaging discussion on #USIndia issues") or issued congratulatory messages on festivals and special occasions (e.g., "Wishing you a joyous Eid al-Fitr from all of us at the U.S. Mission in India. #EidMubarak!").

Although defense and security emerged as an important theme, business and commerce were the dominant refrains of the tweets overall. Tweets often highlighted commercial deals, business meetings, and trade and investment opportunities. Even defense and security were viewed primarily as avenues for commerce. For instance, a tweet from Ambassador Juster reads,

> Congrats Tata Boeing Aerospace for the first Indian-built Apache helicopter fuselage. The fuselage will be sent for final assembly to @Boeing's facility in Mesa, AZ. Great example of #USIndia collaboration to create security & prosperity for both nations. @Boeing_In @TataCompanies.

Education was another important theme, but once again, tweets frequently promoted U.S. universities or U.S. educational businesses in India.

In Britain, tweets expressing "concern" revolved around perceived external security threats— Russia, Iran, North Korea, and so on. In India, the concerns expressed were internal. The mission tweeted on three concerns in particular: the environment, rights of sexual minorities, and religious freedom. The embassy in Delhi as well as the consulates in Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Hyderabad tweeted the "air quality index" of these cities almost every afternoon. Some tweets, while explicitly referring to the mission's participation in various sustainability drives, implicitly drew attention to pollution in India. Similarly, the mission highlighted prejudice against India's LGBTQ community as a human rights issue, often by organizing programs and tweeting about them. For instance, one tweet reads,

> Participate in an LGBTI human rights webchat on June 20 at 11:00 a.m. EDT in honor of Pride Month, a month celebrating the contributions of the LGBTI communities in the United States and around the world. To join the discussion visit: https://t.co/PEaBuN9cLx.

A small number of tweets also raised concerns about "religious freedom" in India, where a Hindu nationalist party that often demonizes Muslims has been in power since 2014. Ironically, the United States itself has a poor and worsening record on these issues. Under President Trump, the U.S. administration has turned its back on international environmental agreements, introduced more than 100 anti-LGBTQ bills in various states, and allowed if not encouraged Islamophobia to rise to unprecedented levels (Kishi, 2017; Meyer, 2017; Tillery, 2018).

The U.S. mission's tweets thus construct America as an ally to India. The two are not nearly as cozy friends as America and Britain (Chacko, 2014), but America values India's strategic significance in the

Indo-Pacific and as a business partner with a large market for American investment and American education (Tourangbam, 2018, van de Wetering, 2016). America is not averse to pointing out concerns, such as pollution and anti-LGBTQ prejudice, but as an ally, it is also willing to lend India a helping hand in dealing with these concerns, such as participating in antipollution drives and organizing events to celebrate LGBTQ pride. As this analysis indicates, identity construction on Twitter can be subtle and capable of distinguishing between a friend and an ally. The technosocial affordances of the medium can be mobilized in different ways to reflect and reproduce delicate differences in meaning.

America as Rival

Although the U.S. mission in India stated that America's Indo-Pacific refrain was symbolic, the U.S. mission in China took it far more seriously. Days after the U.S. military command was renamed, the embassy in Beijing tweeted,

> America is in the Indo-Pacific to stay. This is our priority theater, our interests and the region's are inextricably intertwined. Our Indo-Pacific strategy makes significant security, economic, and development investments, which demonstrate our commitment to allies and partners in support of our vision of a safe, secure, prosperous, and free Indo-Pacific based on shared principles with those nations, large and small.

Indeed, the term *Indo-Pacific* was mentioned in 21 of the 296 tweets posted by the mission in China, in addition to mentions of India itself as a close U.S. ally "deeply bound by our shared values" (China, by contrast, was not mentioned even once by the mission in India).

This fits a broader pattern. The principal focus of the tweets posted by the U.S. mission in China was to showcase America's large and growing footprint in China's neighborhood: its alliance not just with India, but also with Japan, South Korea, and, potentially, North Korea (see Table 1). To wit: North Korea and its leader, "Chairman Kim," were mentioned in 61 tweets, almost a fifth of all tweets posted in the study period. To be sure, this flurry of tweets was driven by the June meeting between Trump and Kim. But viewed in this context, the Singapore summit itself comes across as less about North Korea per se and more about the United States finding another ally in the region, a nation that has historically been close to China. In other words, the deeper meaning of the North Korea talks was to bolster America's position in its rivalry with China, and the zeal with which the U.S. mission in China tweeted about these talks reflected and reproduced this relationship.

But the U.S. mission also "enacted" the rivalry in more direct ways. A number of tweets highlighted lack of democracy and abuses of human rights and religious freedom in China while portraying America as a beacon of these values. One such tweet reads,

> On July 9, 2015, the Chinese government launched a nationwide crackdown on lawyers and rights defenders. More than 300 lawyers & legal associates working on #religiousfreedom and #humanrights cases were detained. As we approach the #thirdanniversary709, we honor these heroes.

Four days later, another tweet marked the one-year anniversary of the death of Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace laureate who had worked "to advance freedom, democracy, and a more humane and just society" in China but died in custody. In September, tweets were posted blaming China's "unfair trade practices" for the U.S. decision to impose a hefty tariff on $200 billion worth of Chinese imports.

A single Twitter account (@USA_China_Talk) means that the U.S. mission in China cannot be compared with missions in Britain and India in terms of differences in the proportion of tweets posted by the main embassy and regional consulates. Its much smaller base of tweets also makes comparisons of retweets of top U.S. policymakers and policymaking institutions harder. Indeed, Trump and Pompeo were never directly retweeted, whereas the White House and State Department were retweeted once each. However, the mission posted 17 tweets that were statements or remarks from Trump and another 30 from Pompeo after translating them into Mandarin. One tweet, for instance, notes, "'The past does not have to define the future. There's no limit to what North Korea can achieve. Today is the beginning of an arduous process . . . only the courageous can make peace' President Trump in Singapore. @POTUS at #SingaporeSummit." This suggests that technology rather than policy was behind the virtual absence of retweets: As Trump's and Pompeo's tweets were in English, the mission chose to translate and post their statements as new tweets from its own account rather than simply "retweet" them, although the new tweets often included a link to the original tweets.

Not every tweet was censorious or threatening. A few tweets did highlight Sino–U.S. cooperation in business as well as diplomacy (Garrison & Wall, 2016; Gray, 2018). But such tweets were few and far between. In the end, U.S. national identity as a "rival" to China—particularly in Asia, but also globally—shaped the U.S. mission's tweeting practices (Nye, 2018). The same technosocial affordances of Twitter that U.S. missions in Britain and India used to reflect and reproduce convivial relationships were employed here to construct a hostile one. In doing so, the U.S. mission in China also gave operational meaning to "rivalry" as a technosocial relationship between nations: Specifying particular ways in which text and technology may be employed to signify this particular type of antagonism on Twitter.

Implications and Conclusion

Extant scholarship on PD 2.0 has focused on the "effectiveness" with which foreign ministries, missions, and diplomats employ Twitter and other SNSs (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Metzgar & Lu, 2015; Sevin, 2017; Uysal et al., 2012). In contrast, we have argued that PD 2.0, like other foreign policy practices, does not take place in a sociopolitical vacuum. Drawing on the constructivist tradition in international relations (Hopf, 2002; Onuf, 2013), we theorize that national identities shape the SNS practices of foreign missions. These identities are contextual and relational, and they are constructed in and through symbolic interaction. Our empirical analysis demonstrates how U.S. identities as friend, ally, and rival are reflected and reproduced in the tweets of U.S. missions in Britain, India, and China, respectively. Below, we discuss the theoretical significance as well as the limitations of our analysis, along with ideas for future research.

First, our analysis indicates that foreign missions do not use SNSs simply to influence the opinions of foreign publics—as PD 2.0 scholarship tends to assume. Instead, missions have a variety of contextual, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory interests, driven by national identities that are contextual and

relational in character (Wendt, 1992). Twitter, as one of the means of practicing these complex relationships, is used in complex ways. For example, the tweeting practices of U.S. missions in Britain and India identified these nations as part of, indeed key figures within, U.S.-led regional alliances in Europe and Asia. But the U.S. mission in China employed Twitter to exclude China from, and even threaten China with, these alliances. And whereas U.S. missions in both China and India made note of various domestic concerns, the mission in Britain turned a blind eye to such issues. National identities thus underlie what is tweeted, how it is tweeted— and what is not tweeted.

This understanding of tweeting practices as contextual and relational could inform public diplomacy research on their "effectiveness" as well (Brown, 2013). Scholars should not assume that certain ways of tweeting are more effective than others irrespective of context: rather, they should judge the effectiveness of Twitter use for "two-way communication" between foreign missions and foreign publics in line with the character of the bilateral relationships they inhabit. Perhaps more importantly, PD 2.0 research can also consider how Twitter can more effectively facilitate symmetric two-way communication, whose purpose is not to manipulate the opinions of foreign publics but to develop shared understandings for mutually beneficial relationships (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Zaharna, 2009). This would imply a willingness to change oneself rather than change foreign public opinion. To be sure, this does not happen overnight. Even the "great rapprochement" between Britain and the United States took a century, and India and the United States mended fences after decades. But if conflictual identities and antagonistic relationships are constructed, they may also be reconstructed.

Second, our study showcases Twitter—and SNSs broadly—as a platform for "meaning-making" in international relations. Such meaning-making takes place at two levels. At one level, tweeting practices give meanings to actors in relational terms: who is a friend, who is an ally, and who is a rival. Nations of the world (and potentially other kinds of actors) are classified based on a register of relational categories: "Britain" as a friend, "India" as an ally, and "China" as a rival. At another level, the same tweeting practices give meanings to the relationships themselves: what is a friend, what is an ally, and what is a rival. These relational categories are operationalized based on the textual and technological affordances of the medium of symbolic interaction, viz. Twitter. Future studies may test the relevance of these relationships in other bilateral contexts. Also, friend, ally, and rival are probably not the only three relational categories that structure the tweeting practices of U.S. and other nations' foreign missions. Scholars may also identify other kinds of relationships that underlie national identities and shape foreign missions' SNS use.

In addition, we have distinguished a series of tweeting practices and their significations in terms of identity performance. Specifically, (1) more personalized tweets; (2) more policy-oriented than event-oriented tweets; (3) more security-themed than business-themed tweets; (4) more historical tweets; (5) more tweets identifying external rather than internal concerns; (6) more tweets posted by the main embassy compared with regional consulates; and (7) more retweets of top policymakers and policymaking institutions are likely to indicate a closer, more convivial relationship (see Table 1).

As these meanings of relations among nations diffuse and come to be widely practiced by diplomatic missions, they may also become yardsticks for policymakers and diplomats to determine who is a friend, ally, or rival, and make policies and take actions accordingly. Tweeting practices, as a form of symbolic

interaction among nations, can thus be generative of international relations themselves as "systems of meaning and signification" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 43). Our analysis illustrates Twitter's productive power, or the capacity to produce social structures—such as friendship, alliance, or rivalry—within which meaning-making takes place (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). This inter"national" process may be viewed as parallel to the production of meaning-making structures in inter"personal" interactions on Twitter—for instance, liberal and conservative "echo chambers" that also facilitate identification and lead to decisions about whom to vote for, among other things (Barberá, 2015).

Third, we have focused on differences in U.S. bilateral relations and their influence on tweeting practices, but our analysis also reveals some important similarities across these relationships: militarism, for instance. Together, the three U.S. missions' tweets normalize American military presence in Europe and the Asia-Pacific even though the United States is not directly engaged in any wars in these regions. Military expansion is viewed as an end in itself, without any need for justification. Indeed, expanding the presence of the U.S. military becomes the justification for forging new alliances and partnerships. Geography itself gets militarized as different regions of the world are named and renamed in terms of military alliances (e.g., "NATO") and military commands (e.g., "Indo-Pacific"). A second common theme is moralism. Especially in India and China but also to some extent in Britain, the U.S. missions construct the United States as a moral leader, committed to upholding the principles of human rights, democracy, religious freedom, and environment protection globally (even as it violates most of these principles within its own borders). Moralism and militarism combine to ascribe another identity to the United States: that of a "global policeman," endowed with both the (military) strength and the (moral) legitimacy to order international affairs. However, as we have looked only at the tweeting practices of U.S. missions, this can at best be a tentative conclusion. Research designs that compare U.S. and other foreign missions can provide more confident analyses of this aspect of Twitter use.

Our study has a number of limitations, which may also serve as avenues for future research. First, we have not studied how British, Indian, and Chinese missions in the United States use Twitter. Research on these missions' Twitter use can help us examine the extent of reciprocity in the relationships we have identified and its impact on tweeting practices. Second, our study was limited to one SNS platform: Twitter. Comparisons of national identity construction across different platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, and so on—can lead to a better understanding of how the algorithmic affordances of different platforms enable or constrain online symbolic interaction among nations. Finally, our study is cross-sectional. Longitudinal studies that cover longer periods of time or a known shift in the relationship between two nations can examine how changes in national identity may lead to changes in social media practices.

References

Adams, L. (2005). *Brothers across the ocean.* London, UK: I. B. Tauris.

Barberá, P. (2015). Birds of the same feather tweet together: Bayesian ideal point estimation using Twitter data. *Political Analysis*, *23*(1), 76–91.

Barnett, M., & Duvall, R. (2005). Power in international politics. *International Organization*, *59*(1), 39–75.

Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (2015). *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice*. London, UK: Routledge.

Bjola, C., & Jiang, L. (2015). Social media and public diplomacy: A comparative analysis of the digital diplomatic strategies of the EU, U.S. and Japan in China. In C. Bjola & M. Holmes (Eds.), *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice* (pp. 71–88). New York, NY: Routledge.

Brock, A. (2012). From the Blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(4), 529–549.

Brock, A. (2018). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, *20*(3), 1012–1030.

Brown, R. (2013). The politics of relational diplomacy. In R. S. Zaharna, A. Arsenault, & A. Fisher (Eds.), *Relational, networked, and collaborative approaches to public diplomacy: The connective mindshift* (pp. 44–55). New York, NY: Routledge.

Chacko, P. (2014). A new "special relationship"? Power transitions, ontological security, and India–U.S. relations. *International Studies Perspectives*, *15*(3), 329–346.

Chen, W., Tu, F., & Zheng, P. (2017). A transnational networked public sphere of air pollution: Analysis of a Twitter network of PM2.5 from the risk society perspective. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(7), 1005–1023.

Dobson, A. P. (1995). *Anglo-American relations in the twentieth century*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

Garrison, J., & Wall, M. (2016). The rise of hedging and regionalism: An explanation and evaluation of President Obama's China policy. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, *43*(2), 47–63.

Gilboa, E. (2008). Searching for a theory of public diplomacy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *616*(1), 55–77.

Gray, S. (2018, March 7). These are the biggest U.S. trading partners. *Fortune*. Retrieved from http://fortune.com/2018/03/07/biggest-us-trade-partners/

Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart & Winston.

Gruzd, A. (2019). *Netlytic: Software for automated text and social network analysis*. Retrieved from
        http://netlytic.org

Hindu. (2010). *U.S. President Barack Obama's Parliament address*. Retrieved from
        https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/U.S.-President-Barack-Obamarsquos-Parliament-
        address/article15679467.ece

Hopf, T. (2002). *Social construction of international politics: Identities & foreign policies, Moscow, 1955
        and 1999*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jackson, S. T. (2019). A turning IR landscape in a shifting media ecology: The state of IR literature on
        new media. *International Studies Review*, *21*(3), 518–534.

Keohane, R. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy.* Princeton,
        NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kishi, K. (2017). *Assaults against Muslims in U.S. surpass 2001 level*. Retrieved from
        http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-
        2001-level/

Lee, E. J., & Oh, S. Y. (2012). To personalize or depersonalize? When and how politicians' personalized
        tweets affect the public's reactions. *Journal of Communication*, *62*(6), 932–949.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Metzgar, E. T., & Lu, X. (2015). Tweeting the pivot? The United States and PD 2.0 in Northeast Asia. *Place
        Branding and Public Diplomacy*, *11*(3), 204–215.

Meyer, R. (2017, November 8). Syria is joining the Paris Agreement. Now what? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved
        from https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/11/syria-is-joining-the-paris-agreement-
        now-what/545261/

Nye, J. (2018). Time will tell. *Foreign Affairs*, *97*(4). 190–192.

Onuf, N. (2013). *Making sense, making worlds: Constructivism in social theory and international relations.*
        New York, NY: Routledge.

Pamment, J. (2013). *New public diplomacy in the 21st century: A comparative study of policy and
        practice*. London, UK: Routledge.

Pettinger, T. (2017). *Top CO_2 polluters and highest per capita*. Retrieved from
        https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/10296/economics/top-co2-polluters-highest-per-capita/

Politi, J. (2018, October 16). Donald Trump looks to start formal U.S.–UK trade talks. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/868cedae-d18a-11e8-a9f2-7574db66bcd5

Politico. (2018). *Full text: Donald Trump–Theresa May press conference*. Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/13/full-text-theresa-may-trump-visit-transcript-718569

Rice, C. (2006). *Transformational diplomacy*. Retrieved from https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm

Ruggie, J. G. (2002). *Constructing the world polity: Essays on international institutionalisation*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Schulze, E. (2018, July 13). History shows the U.S.–UK special relationship is increasingly one-sided. *CNBC.* Retrieved from https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/12/trump-in-uk-history-shows-the-us-uk-special-relationship-is-increasin.html

Sevin, E. (2017). *Public diplomacy and the implementation of foreign policy in the U.S., Sweden and Turkey*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sevin, E., & Ingenhoff, D. (2018). Public diplomacy on social media: Analyzing networks and content. *International Journal of Communication*, *12*, 3663–3685.

Shifrin, N. (2014). *Environmental perspectives*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Statista. (2019). *Leading countries based on number of Twitter users as of July 2019 (in millions)*. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/

Tillery, B. (2018). *Anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes are on the rise, and our government is to blame*. Retrieved from https://www.them.us/story/anti-lgbtq-hate-crimes-are-on-the-rise

Tourangbam, M. (2018). What's next for India–U.S. relations? *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/whats-next-for-india-us-relations/

U.S. Department of State. (2017). *Global social media presence*. Retrieved from https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ode/socialmedia/index.htm

Uysal, N., Schroeder, J., & Taylor, M. (2012). Social media and soft power: Positioning Turkey's image on Twitter. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, *5*(3), 338–359.

van de Wetering, C. (2016). *Changing U.S. foreign policy toward India: U.S.–India relations since the Cold War.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization*, *46*(2), 391–425.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

White House. (2017, June 26). *United States and India: Prosperity through partnership*. Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-india-prosperity-partnership/

Wichowski, A. (2013, April 5). Social diplomacy, or how diplomats learned to stop worrying and love the tweet. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2013-04-05/social-diplomacy

Wilson, G. K. (2017). Brexit, Trump and the special relationship. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *19*(3), 543–557.

Yun, S. H. (2012). Relational public diplomacy: The perspective of sociological globalism. *International Journal of Communicati*on, *6*, 2199–2219.

Zaharna, R. S. (2009). Mapping out a spectrum of public diplomacy initiatives: Information and relational communication frameworks. In N. Snow & P. M. Taylor (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of public diplomacy* (pp. 86–100). New York, NY: Routledge.

Zaharna, R. S. (2010). *Battles to bridges: U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy after 9/11*. London, UK: Springer.

Zaharna, R. S. (2016). Reassessing "whose story wins": The trajectory of identity resilience in narrative contests. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*, 4407–4438.