

Wrestlemania! Summit Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Performance after Trump

BENJAMIN S. DAY

Australian National University, Australia

AND

ALISTER WEDDERBURN 

University of Glasgow, UK

In this article, we propose the category of “foreign policy performance” in order to argue that a recognition of foreign policy’s theatricality can illuminate its contribution to generative processes of social construction and world-making. We focus on the practice of summit diplomacy, which operates according to a “theatrical rationality” that blurs the boundary between substantive and symbolic politics. Noting that Donald Trump’s presidency called into question many of international relations’ prevailing assumptions regarding foreign policy’s formulation and execution, we suggest that a performance-oriented analytic can facilitate a critical reckoning both with Trump himself and with the “statesmanlike” norms he eschewed. We read Trump’s performances at international summits with reference to professional wrestling, which for all its melodramatic absurdity is a venerable and complex theatrical tradition with a highly developed critical language. Guided by four pieces of wrestling argot (“heat,” “heel,” “kayfabe,” and “cutting a promo”), we use process-tracing techniques to develop a wrestling-oriented reading of Trump’s 2018 summit with Kim Jong-Un in Singapore. We argue that using wrestling in order to read Trump and Kim’s deviation from the conventional norms and repertoires of foreign policy performance enables a critical assessment of the stakes at play in their reconstruction and re-establishment.

En este artículo, proponemos la categoría de “desempeño en política exterior” para argumentar que un reconocimiento de la dramatización de la política exterior puede iluminar su contribución a los procesos generativos de construcción social y creación de mundos. Nos centramos en la práctica de la diplomacia en las cumbres, que funciona de acuerdo con una “racionalidad de la dramatización” que desdibuja el límite entre la política sustantiva y la simbólica. Dado que la presidencia de Donald Trump puso en tela de juicio muchas de las suposiciones que prevalecen en las relaciones internacionales con respecto a la formulación y ejecución de la política exterior, sugerimos que un análisis orientado al desempeño puede facilitar un ajuste de cuentas crítico tanto con el propio Trump como con las normas de “estadista” que evitó. Leemos las actuaciones de Trump en las cumbres internacionales con referencia a la lucha libre profesional, que con todo su absurdo melodrama es una tradición teatral compleja y venerable con un lenguaje crítico muy desarrollado. Guiados por cuatro expresiones de la jerga de la lucha libre (“calor,” “rudo,” “kayfabe” y “cutting a promo” [cuando un luchador promociona una lucha de él mismo]), utilizamos técnicas de seguimiento de procesos para desarrollar una lectura orientada a la lucha libre de la cumbre a la que asistió Trump en 2018 con Kim Jong-Un en Singapur. Argumentamos que el uso de la lucha libre para comprender la desviación de Trump y Kim de las normas y repertorios convencionales de desempeño de la política exterior permite una evaluación crítica de lo que está en juego en su reconstrucción y restablecimiento.

Dans cet article, nous proposons la catégorie « prestation d’acteur en politique étrangère » afin de soutenir qu’une reconnaissance de la théâtralité de la politique étrangère peut éclairer sa contribution aux processus générateurs de construction sociale et de façonnement du monde. Nous nous concentrons sur la pratique de la diplomatie des sommets, qui s’opère selon une « rationalité théâtrale » qui floute la frontière entre politique réelle et politique symbolique. Nous remarquons que la présidence de Donald Trump a remis en question de nombreuses hypothèses dominantes des RI concernant la formulation et l’exécution de la politique étrangère et nous suggérons qu’une analyse de la prestation d’acteur pourrait faciliter l’examen critique à la fois de Trump lui-même et des normes « d’homme d’État » qu’il a évitées. Nous nous livrons à une lecture des prestations de Trump lors des sommets internationaux en faisant référence au catch professionnel dont toute l’absurdité mélodramatique est une tradition théâtrale complexe canonique dont le langage critique est très développé. Guidés par quatre éléments de l’argot du catch (« heat », « heel », « kayfabe » et « coupure d’une promo »), nous utilisons des techniques de traçage de processus pour développer une lecture orientée catch du sommet de Trump avec Kim Jong-Un à Singapour en 2018. Nous soutenons que l’utilisation du catch pour lire les écarts de Donald Trump et Kim Jong-Un par rapport aux normes et répertoires conventionnels de prestation d’acteur en politique étrangère permet une évaluation critique des enjeux dans leur reconstruction et leur rétablissement.

Benjamin S. Day is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University. His research interests concern the role of political leaders in foreign policy decision-making.

Alister Wedderburn is a lecturer in International Relations at the University of Glasgow. His research focuses on critical IR theory and the politics of visual, literary, and popular cultures. He is preparing a project on the expeditionary narratives of early modern Arctic explorers.

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We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be

(Vonnegut 2009, v)

My whole life has been heat. I like heat, in a certain way

(Trump 2018a)

Introduction

Writing in 1987, Richard K. Ashley argued that a set of “ritual idealisations” had come to straitjacket International Relations’ (IR’s) engagement with foreign policy (Ashley 1987, 51). For Ashley, foreign policy analysis rested on certain categories and distinctions—between the domestic and international spheres, between politics and economics, between states and other actors—that it treated as fixed horizons of thought and practice. By naturalizing these assumptions, scholars had made the mistake of “tak[ing] boundaries of global political life as pre-given starting points of inquiry, not as problematical phenomena in need of explaining” (Ashley 1987, 51).

Ashley suggested that these idealized “boundaries” were neither independent of nor prior to the practice of foreign policy. Instead, they were produced iteratively, through action: foreign policy was, in other words, a *performance*.

Why not understand foreign policy as a specific sort of interpretive performance whose overlapping effects include (a) the constitution and empowering of states and other subjects, (b) the defining of their socially recognized competencies, and (c) the securing of the boundaries that differentiate domestic and international, economic and political spheres of practice...? (Ashley 1987, 53)

Although foreign policy remains “a taken-for-granted term” in much IR scholarship (Leira 2019, 188), a number of constructivist and post-structuralist theorists have built on Ashley’s account of it as “a specific sort of boundary-producing political performance” (Ashley 1987, 51; see also Campbell 1992; Doty 1993; Hopf 1998, 179; Weldes 1999; Solomon 2015). This literature seeks to open up foreign policy as a productive field that not only delimits and defines a distinct international sphere but also posits itself as the form of politics appropriate to this space. Yet, although “performance” in this classically “performative” sense is by no means detached from the term’s theatrical and dramatic meanings (see, e.g., Butler 2014, xxv), constructivist and post-structuralist analyses have rarely engaged seriously with the implications of this for the study of processes of identity-construction and social meaning-making.

In this article, we rethink the role of performance in the practice and analysis of foreign policy. In a heavily mediated contemporary world in which economies of celebrity, spectacle, and attention play increasingly central roles, the embodied, gestural, and theatrical aspects of foreign policy are productive, generative forces in their own right, rather than distractions from the “proper” business of international affairs. We thus argue first that foreign policymaking is inherently theatrical and second that a recognition of this theatricality can inform a fuller, richer account of its contribution to productive processes of social construction and world-making. The first of these points distinguishes our argument from IR scholarship on practices, which appeals to the language of performance without adequately differentiating it from other forms of socially meaningful action (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Ringmar 2014). The second point distinguishes us from a body of recent work that has

highlighted the roles of ceremony, pageantry, and spectacle in foreign policymaking while maintaining an analytic distinction between “performative” and “substantive” modes of political practice (e.g., Hall 2015; Keys and Yorke 2019, 1241; Ding 2020, 529–30). In contrast to these literatures, which either conceptualize performance thinly or isolate it from politics as a tool to be picked up or set down as the situation demands, we propose the category of “foreign policy performance” as a way of understanding international relations’ constitutive inextricability from styles of presentation and staging.

The theatrical qualities of foreign policy might be identified in any number of places, from the symbolic rituals that sustain international organizations to the gendered role-playing expected of diplomatic wives (Enloe 2014; Davies 2018, 174–210). However, our focus in this article is on international summits, which operate according to what Carl Death describes as a “theatrical rationality” (Death 2011, 2). Summits provide actors with a stage on which to broadcast particular identities and roles, make claims to legitimacy and authority, or demonstrate leadership and good standing. In this capacity, they are “advertising and branding sites” even as they generate “particular effects in terms of the construction of ... subjects and the disciplining of participation and engagement” in international affairs (Death 2011, 13–15). As such, they present a site at which “foreign policy performance” in the productive, generative sense and “foreign policy performance” in the spectacular, theatrical sense might fruitfully be brought together.

The urgency of this task has been brought into focus by the recent presidency of Donald Trump, which exposed the limitations and contingencies of many of IR’s prevailing categories, assumptions, and “ritualized idealizations” regarding the formulation and execution of foreign policy. Trump’s ascendancy and term in office precipitated heated debates about a wide range of issues including the limitations of grand strategy (Lissner and Rapp-Hooper 2018), the administrative capacity of the state (Drezner 2019), the explanatory capabilities of rationalist theories of agency (Walt 2017), and potential or actual crises of US hegemony and the liberal order it sustains (Ikenberry 2018).

Underpinning many analysts’ unease was a sense that Trump’s political persona was simply an extension of his reality TV celebrity: that “the key to understanding Trump’s foreign policy outlook lay in his extreme attention to symbolism,” eclipsing all “questions of substance” (Wolf 2017, 99). For many, this muddying of the waters between “symbolism” and “substance” was to be resisted or rejected: Stephen Walt’s exasperated challenge to “find a statesman anywhere in [Trump’s] incoherent and self-centered performance[s]” is in this sense exemplary (Walt 2017). In contrast, we proceed from the position that the challenge facing scholars of foreign policy in a post-Trump era is not to reestablish the ritually idealized boundary between “performance” and statesmanlike “substance” but rather to excavate the terrain exposed by its dissolution. Our analysis highlights the centrality of performance to the naturalistic displays of “decorum” that conventionally structure the foreign policy performances of liberal-democratic leaders as well as to the postures of racially exclusionary masculinity adopted by other populists such as Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Narendra Modi, and Viktor Orban. As such, while Trump has done more than anybody to bring the themes of this article into focus, their scope and relevance extend well beyond him. Even after his departure from office, foreign policy scholarship stands to benefit from engaging seriously with the constitutive role of performance in producing the

identities, roles, interests, and relations that comprise the substantive “stuff” of international politics.

We draw on insights from the field of performance studies in order to make sense of the “entwined symbolic, libidinal, and political economies” that constitute foreign policy performances, whether at international summits or elsewhere (Cole and Shulman 2018, 337; see also Grobe 2020). In particular, we mobilize concepts, terminology, and argot from the world of professional wrestling, which we use in tandem with process-tracing methods to construct a performance-oriented account of Trump’s 2018 meeting with Kim Jong-Un in Singapore. For all its absurdity and bombast, professional wrestling is a venerable and complex theatrical tradition with a highly developed conceptual and critical language (e.g., Mazer 1998; Smith 2014; Mazer et al. 2020; O’Brien 2020). A rich body of cultural theory and performance studies literature has engaged seriously with wrestling on its own terms, reading it as a vital cultural site where society’s animating tensions are ritually dramatized and played out (e.g., Mazer 1998; Jenkins 2005; Barthes 2009; Moon 2022). Drawing on this literature, we argue that wrestling is a pertinent lens through which to read international summits, which also cordon off a masculinized arena in which expansive, complex issues can be distilled into a comestible narrative, arranged into a series of symbolic set pieces, and presented to a global audience. Importantly, wrestling is also a world with which Trump himself is deeply and personally familiar: Trump has hosted professional wrestling events at his resorts, he has participated in storylines as a performer, and he has even been inducted into World Wrestling Entertainment’s (WWE’s) Hall of Fame.

Our article unfolds in three sections. In the first, we outline the limitations of three literatures that incorporate performance into their accounts of foreign policy. In the second section, we address these limitations by engaging with professional wrestling studies literature, explaining why this particular theatrical tradition offers a particularly illuminating lens through which to read Trump’s behavior at international summits. In the third section, we recreate the July 2018 summit between Trump and Kim, using the peculiarities of this specific case as a way of illuminating the norms and expectations that govern other actors’ foreign policy performances. In our conclusion, we examine the aftermath of the Singapore Summit, comment on the stakes at play in our reimagining of the role of performance in foreign policy, and suggest further avenues for research.

Performance, Foreign Policy, and Summit Diplomacy

We identify three approaches to performance in the study of foreign policy, which we call post-structuralist, practice-theoretical, and “performative.” Our review in this section proceeds by exploring these three approaches in turn. We conclude with an appraisal of summit diplomacy, the field of foreign policy performance most overtly governed by theatrical considerations. We argue that international summits yield fruitful insights into the role of performance in the practice of foreign policy that we subsequently build on in the latter sections of the article.

Post-Structuralist Accounts of Performance in Foreign Policy

Richard Ashley’s conceptualization of foreign policy as a “boundary-producing political performance” exemplifies an approach that has informed a number of post-structuralist accounts of foreign policy over the last thirty years.

According to this literature, foreign policy is “boundary-producing” insofar as it defines a set of differentiations—between domestic and international, friend and enemy, self and other—that ground actors’ identities and interests and delimit the ethical and political landscapes in which they make their way. This understanding animates David Campbell’s distinction between “foreign policy” and “Foreign Policy,” the former referring to these exclusionary practices of differentiation and the latter referring to the specific field of interstate relations to which they give rise. The boundaries drawn through the practice of “foreign policy” thus “structur[e] the conditions, limits, and socially accepted categories of [Foreign Policy] practice” (Ashley 1987, 52). In Campbell’s words, “‘foreign policy’ has provided the discursive economy or conventional matrix of interpretations in which ... Foreign Policy operates” (Campbell 1992, 76).

The circumscriptive practices that define “foreign policy” are “performances” in the sense in which speech-act and other performativity theorists use the term: they are signifying gestures that bring into being that which they purport to describe. In contrast to rationalist theories that assume bounded and secure subjective identities existing prior to action, performativity theorists emphasize that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, but [rather that] ... the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler 2014, 181). Subjective identities, and the intersubjective terrain on which they find meaning, are thus constituted as the effects rather than the causes of social action (Weber 1998, 78).

From this perspective, “foreign policy” does not describe the strategic actions of predefined actors in a given political space. Its meaning “shifts from a concern [with] relations between states ... to a concern with the establishment of the boundaries that constitute, at one and the same time, the ‘state’ and ‘the international system’” (Campbell 1992, 69). For Ashley, the “performances” that establish these boundaries are discursive practices: “texts, or text analogues, through which actors are cited and recited into existence” (Ringmar 2016, 102). In light of performativity theory’s roots in speech-act theory, it is perhaps unsurprising that subsequent post-structuralist treatments of foreign policy performance have often focused on foreign policy texts and their contribution to the “linguistic construction of reality” (Doty 1993, 302; see also Campbell 1992, 5-6 and Solomon 2015, 2). More recently, this literature has broadened to encompass a rich collage of meaning-making practices that include gestures, images, icons, objects, and “rhythms” (Hansen 2015; Williams 2018; Solomon 2019). Yet, notwithstanding these acknowledgements that performativity “involv[es] both the ideal and the material, the linguistic and the non-linguistic” (Bialasiewicz et al 2007, 406), post-structuralist analyses have rarely foregrounded the roles of formal or informal traditions of social and theatrical performance in producing the assumptions, beliefs, narratives, myths, and norms that sustain social, political, and international political life.

Practice Theory, Performance, and Foreign Policy

Practice theorists have attempted to address this gap by embracing “a performative understanding of the world” as part of a broader emphasis on the generative capacities of social action (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 450-51; see also Pouliot 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). Despite these scholars’ rhetorical appeal to performance, however, they have nevertheless tended to subsume it along with other “socially meaningful patterns

of action” into the much broader category of “practice” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4; Pouliot and Cornut 2015, 300–301). For Adler and Pouliot, for example, “practice is a performance,” though “it is [also] relevant ... to understand practice as discourse”—an elision that can only be sustained by defining performance imprecisely, as simply “a process of doing something” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6, 16; see also Ringmar 2012, 8; 2014, 5–6). This approach cannot adequately reckon with performance as something with its own, distinct grammar. In particular, practice theorists’ technocratic appeal to shared visions of “competence” as the primary standard by which practices are judged obscures the creative, dynamic, and interactive processes through which performers and their audiences produce meaning, knowledge, and affect (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 893–96). It is for this reason that Erik Ringmar argues that practice theory’s appeal to the language of performance is altogether misplaced:

Practices are “presentational”, not re-presentational; they are not to be seen or noticed in their own right, and they have an audience not by design but only by coincidence. The verdicts which such coincidental audiences might pass on what they see concerns whether a practice is “correctly” carried out, but there is no correct way to play Hamlet the way there is a correct way to drive a bus. Practices are not performances. (Ringmar 2014, 5–6).

Practice theory, in Ringmar’s reading, describes a process of ritual idealization that defines, naturalizes, and reproduces “competence” among diplomats and other professionals. As we shall see, this is only one mode of foreign policy performance—one, moreover, that in its presentational naturalism departs from the knowing interaction between performer and audience that more commonly defines theater. As such, practice theorists’ appeals to the language of performativity—like those of post-structuralists before them—do not fully recognize the ways in which international relations are staged and stage-managed, mediated by formal and informal traditions of embodied performance and theatrical presentation as well as by habit and routine (Ringmar 2016, 114).

“Performativity” and Foreign Policy

It is with a sense of these limitations that a body of recent work has drawn attention to the ritual or ceremonial aspects of foreign policy. Confusingly, this literature also uses the term “performativity,” but this usage is dislocated from speech act theory and from post-structuralist accounts of subject-formation, referring instead to the use of artifice by states or statespeople in pursuit of their strategic interests. (This dislocation informs our use of inverted commas.) For example, Iza Ding develops the concept of “performative governance” to refer to the theatrical presentation of political aptitude or efficiency. These presentations are intended “to foster an *impression* of good governance” (emphasis added), in contrast with “substantive” modes of policymaking that materially benefit the lives of citizens (Ding 2020, 526). Ding’s analysis thus seeks to maintain and clarify the distinction between “performance” and “substance,” in contrast to performativity theory’s insistence on their ontological complicity.

In the field of foreign policy analysis, Todd Hall has contributed to a renewed interest in interpersonal diplomacy by observing the importance of emotions to the practice of statecraft (Hall 2015; see also Holmes 2013; Wong 2016).

What Hall calls “emotional diplomacy” refers to the performance of particular emotional states, or the projection of particular emotional identities, as part of wider strategies of foreign policymaking. Although Hall (2015, 3) emphasizes that “emotional diplomacy is not simply rhetoric,” these performances are nevertheless part of a field of strategic interaction and are thus substantive only insofar as they are expedient. As such, emotional diplomacy is “a primarily instrumental form of behaviour, a strategy by which state actors seek to achieve certain ends ... by its very nature [it] is the product of a deliberate, coordinated policy choice to project a particular image” (Hall 2015, 5). The “performative logic” that Hall identifies at the heart of emotional diplomacy thus denotes an assemblage of symbolic gestures at an ontological remove from the subject making them (Hall 2015, 5–6; see also Keys and Yorke 2019, 1238; Keys 2020, 12). This move limits the substantive content of these gestures to the fulfilment of interests rather than their formation. For Hall, performance is a single entry in a menu of strategies available to foreign policy actors, rather than something constitutive of the political field per se. It is a tactic through which to pursue preconceived interests rather than something that contributes meaningfully to boundary-producing processes.

Summit Diplomacy’s “Theatrical Rationality”

In contrast to the three literatures outlined above, our conceptualization of “foreign policy performance” denotes a way of “think[ing] through politics and performance ... together ... as ‘folded’ in myriad and complex patterns, interanimating one another as domains of political subjectivation and creative practice” (Edkins and Kear 2013, 8; emphasis in original). Our aim is to foreground the theatrical, staged, and stage-managed aspects of foreign policy while *also* acknowledging their constitutive contribution to performative processes of social construction and subject formation. It is with this aim in mind that we turn our attention toward summit diplomacy, the domain where this interplay is most apparent.

A number of scholars have drawn attention to the theatrical qualities of state dinners, parades, photocalls, and other features of international visits, summits, and meetings (e.g., Death 2011; Craggs and Mahony 2014). This literature recognizes international summits as sites where actors project and produce identities, interests, affinities, and antagonisms in front of (and in collaboration with) audiences comprised of states, statespeople, and citizenries alike. It is for this reason that Carl Death identifies a “theatrical rationality” underpinning international environmental meetings: for Death, these summits present idealized or “exemplary” visions of order that “communicate particular standards of responsible conduct and performatively enact particular constructions of ... politics and authorit[y]” (Death 2011, 7).

Death’s use of “performatively” encompasses the term’s multiple accents and meanings. The rituals, set-pieces, rolling news coverage, photo-ops, meetings, and police-protestor confrontations that constitute international summits are symbolic, theatrical, and often self-consciously acted out. However, they are also boundary-producing, reinforcing “dominant hierarchical, state-centric, elitist and rationalist models of politics, as well as ... relationships between the rulers and the ruled, or the actors and the audience” (Death 2011, 2). In this regard, “their very theatricality constitutes an important technique for the conduct of global politics and diplomacy ... these aspects of

summitry are not merely sideshows to the main business of negotiations, but are rather essential to the manner in which summits govern the conduct of global politics” (Death 2011, 5–6). It is this capacity to bring together the approaches outlined above that makes international summits exemplary sites of foreign policy performance.

Foreign policy performances are always overlapping and multiple, because diplomats retain a personal identity even as they function as an embodied representative of their nation and its perceived interests (Keys 2020). At summits—and in particular, summits involving state leaders with prominent public profiles—this metatheatrical tension is amplified. On the one hand, as David Reynolds asserts, “personalised power is at the heart of summitry”: summits serve to bolster the sense that world politics is driven by determined and visionary individuals in possession of exceptional personal qualities (Reynolds 2009, 15). On the other, however, these individuals are also representative of both a national body and a professionalized political elite. Their performances at summits thus also form part of a broader “performative demonstration of legitimacy ... [showing] that the political class are still offering alternative visions ... and that political institutions are still capable of then implementing their decisions” (Blühdorn 2007, 266). As such, world leaders’ foreign policy performances at international summits provide a focal point where the fantasies, desires, and tensions that animate public life and national identity in their respective polities can be articulated and played out (Cole and Shulman 2018, 337–38; Keys 2020, 2).

It is here that one can identify an overlap between international summits and wrestling performances—the latter of which also “make a vivid show of ... the tensions of ... domesticity and polity ... [and] remythologise the threat of the unfamiliar and the foreign” (Mazer 2018, 193–94). Writing about the French music-hall wrestling tradition—a quaint but recognizable antecedent of WWE’s nationalist and masculinist bravado—Roland Barthes suggested that wrestling functioned as a site where everyday narratives of (in)justice, power, suffering, and retribution were played out. Barthes characterized wrestling by its “emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs”: it was a field where the protagonists’ inner virtue or despicability always manifested outwardly, whether in the shapes of their bodies, their facial expressions, their names, or their costumes (Barthes 2009, 7). In France, this mechanism was driven by wrestlers’ ethical attributes: the “babyface” characters were defined by their valor and rectitude, while the “heels” were simply *salauds*, “bastards” (Barthes 2009, 5).

However, Barthes also noted that wrestling in the US fed on a different set of traits and characteristics, and thus a different kind of conflict: “in America wrestling represents a sort of mythological fight ... of a quasipolitical nature, the ‘bad’ wrestler always being supposed to be a Red” (Barthes 2009, 12). Contemporary US pro-wrestling has retained these overtones: it “makes a show of American values” and dramatizes the struggle to assert them in a world of abstract but irredeemable hostility and otherness (Mazer 2018, 175). In doing so, it “embodies the fundamental contradictions of the American populist tradition”—contradictions that orbit around the disjuncture between assurances of singular national virtue and might, and the impossibility of truly and finally realizing these assurances in a recalcitrant world populated by an obscure gallery of bandits and traitors (Jenkins 2005, 64). At stake in the brand of wrestling exemplified by the WWE is, in short, a struggle to “Make America Great Again.” It is in Donald Trump’s embodiment of this quest, as well as its imbrication into his own personal

fate, that wrestling can shed light on his performances in the foreign policy arena.

Wrestlemania! Trump and Foreign Policy Performance

In the previous section, we surveyed three literatures that engage with the role of performance in foreign policy. We argued that none of these literatures fully capture this relationship, turning to the field of summit diplomacy by way of illustration. In this section, we draw on a specific theatrical tradition—professional wrestling—in order to lay the groundwork for our account of Trump’s 2018 summit with Kim Jong-Un in Singapore.

We begin this section by discussing our methodology. We use a modified process-tracing approach to develop a performance-oriented reading of the Singapore Summit, employing four key pieces of wrestling terminology—“heat,” “heel,” “kayfabe,” and “cut a promo”—to guide our narrative. While wrestling provides a convenient lens through which to read Trump’s personal foreign policy performances, it also functions in our analysis as a “methodological metaphor” (Åhäll 2016, 155): as an interpretive framework through which more established genres of diplomatic theater can be identified and questioned. We discuss Trump’s refusal to act in accordance with these ritually idealized, “naturalistic” customs and conventions of foreign policy performance. Using wrestling in order to read Trump and Kim’s behavior, we argue, illuminates the repertoires and scripts from which they departed. This enables a critical assessment of the stakes at play in their contemporary reestablishment and reproduction. We conclude by explaining the four terms that guide our account of the Singapore Summit in the article’s next section.

A Word on Method

Our account of the Singapore Summit largely relies on orthodox process-tracing techniques. By engaging with sources of contemporary history—chiefly newspaper reports, memoirs, and magazine articles but also academic research, think-tank reports, photographs, videos, and social media feeds—we first generated a “base narrative” (Collier 2011, 828), which carefully sequenced events leading up to the summit, beginning from Trump’s campaign for the Republican Party nomination. We then applied the wrestling framework to transform the base narrative into what Blatter and Haverland (2012, 30) refer to as a “comprehensive storyline.” The framework functions as a stylistic device that nevertheless generates an internally consistent and compelling explanation of the behavior of the lead actors during the decision-making process.¹

We are not suggesting that Trump purposefully or consciously adopted a wrestling playbook or that wrestling can illuminate the behavior of all foreign policy actors. Instead, the deliberate slippage between our orthodox data-collection methods and unorthodox mode of presentation is intended to illuminate both the centrality of performance to the practice of summit diplomacy and its incidental, marginal position within conventional frameworks of analysis. Two overlapping conclusions arise from our

¹Typically, reconstructions of foreign policy decision-making episodes tend to focus either on tracing one or more causal factors across one or more cases (e.g., Tannenwald 2007) or on demonstrating how certain factors of theoretical importance interact to lead to a given outcome (e.g., Yetiv 2011).

wrestling-oriented account. First, that these orthodox frameworks exclude much of importance from their analyses, and second that wrestling's barely sublimated performances of masculinized violence and competitive hypernationalism illuminate many of these exclusions. It follows, therefore, that our reconstruction of the Singapore Summit should be considered as an example of what Levy calls a "plausibility probe." Our aim is to "to give the reader a 'feel' for [our] theoretical argument by providing a concrete example of its application" (Levy 2008, 6).

In addition to directly informing our account of the Singapore Summit, however, wrestling also functions as what Linda Åhäll (2016, 155) calls a "methodological metaphor," helping to identify and assess the naturalized norms that more commonly govern foreign policy performances at international summits. For Åhäll, metaphor's methodological utility lies in its conceptual and linguistic recalibration of conventional modes of description, explanation, and understanding. In so doing, it politicizes the taken-for-granted "common sense" underpinning processes of social reproduction, illuminating "more ... than what is immediately apparent" about the practices, processes, and performances that constitute international affairs (Åhäll 2016, 160–61). Insofar as metaphors are constitutive of all forms of human understanding, moreover, they also enable critical reflection on the "normalising process[es]" through which this mythical "common sense" is constructed (Åhäll 2016, 162; see also Marks 2011).

The obvious rejoinder to this position is outlined by Susan Sontag. Writing about illness, she argued that "the most truthful way of regarding [it] ... is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 1978, 3). Yet, while Sontag is surely right in arguing that illness is *not* a metaphor, the same cannot be said of summit diplomacy, premised as it is on the idea that an individual can performatively embody a state. Ascetically purifying ourselves of metaphor in the manner advocated by Sontag—as a way of getting down to the *real* business of foreign policy—would thus risk reestablishing the ritually idealized boundary between performance and substance that our analysis thus far has resisted.

For this reason, our macro-methodological turn to wrestling as a guiding metaphor through which to read Trump and Kim's summit diplomacy represents an attempt to work creatively with metaphor as something woven into the language of IR as a discipline as well as the performances that constitute foreign policy as a field. Wrestling thus has a "pedagogical" function within our analysis: like science fiction or other established pop-cultural reference points within IR, it enables reflection on wider theoretical claims and political dilemmas (Williams 2018, 888).

In this light, our wrestling-oriented reading of the Singapore Summit does more than simply describe or explain Trump's method and style as a politician. It also denaturalizes the "common sense" norms of "decorum" from which he departed—norms that commonly shape the expectations and behavior of foreign policy analysts as well as diplomats (McConnell 2018). Our use of wrestling as a "methodological metaphor" in this article opens these norms up to questioning, asking what is at stake in their maintenance and reproduction—or in their reestablishment in a post-Trump era. It does this by foregrounding aspects of summit diplomacy that are often missing from analyses that take "decorum" for granted, including (but not limited to) masculinity, violence, and humor. Importantly, it also focuses attention on the ways in which these themes are

staged and choreographed as part of a wider field of foreign policy performance that also encompasses the deliberation and bargaining more commonly centered in discussions of foreign policy and summit diplomacy. We address these themes in our conclusion.

Finally, it is worth noting that wrestling is a metaphor that Trump himself has endorsed. On July 3, 2017, he tweeted a video depicting a bodyslam he performed as part of a 2007 WWE storyline with the CNN logo crudely superimposed onto his opponent's face (Trump 2017a). It became his most shared tweet, and remained so until October 2020, when it was surpassed by his announcement that he had tested positive for COVID-19.

Trump and Foreign Policy Performance

As the first President with no prior professional background in politics or the military, Trump was expected to take some time to find his feet diplomatically. A sequence of high-profile blunders in the early stages of his presidency soon revealed his naïveté, including his inadvertent revealing of highly classified intelligence to Russian diplomats during a May 2017 Oval Office meeting (Mason and Zengerle 2017). Despite these missteps, it was frequently suggested—including by Trump himself—that his idiosyncrasies would be reined in by the office he found himself occupying. Trump, the argument went, would learn the repertoires of appropriate behavior his role demanded and adjust his performances accordingly.

This assumption proved mistaken. By August 2017, Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell had resigned himself to the reality that Trump was "entirely unwilling to learn the basics of governing" (Burns and Martin 2017). Yet, despite his lack of formal expertise, Trump remained supremely confident in his ability to conduct diplomacy on his own terms. According to John Bolton, who served as Trump's National Security Adviser during the Singapore Summit, Trump was content to formulate foreign policy "on instinct" (Bolton 2020, 2).

At international summits, Trump's "instinct" manifested in a fondness for extravagant personal meetings with leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un, a willingness physically to shove aside other world leaders in order to be at the front of photo-ops, a readiness to depart summits early in response to perceived slights, and a tendency to treat ceremonial handshakes as a physical struggle for symbolic supremacy. These behaviors caused significant hermeneutic problems among scholars of international affairs, foreign policy, and diplomacy. Analysts were "at a loss" (Wolf 2017, 99), unsure how to deal with someone apparently incapable of distinguishing between personal and national interests and unwilling to uphold the established principles of "civil[ity], tactful[ness], modest[y], loyal[ty], and discern[ment]" that traditionally constitute diplomatic performances of "decorum" (McConnell 2018, 363).

One consequence of Trump's refusal to conform to the norms that structured others' diplomatic and foreign policy performances, however, was to make clear their status *as* norms—as ritually idealized boundaries enabling the differentiation and discernment of a specific, professionalized category of "politics" and "politician." As recently as 2010, Jeffrey Alexander could write that "political performance succeeds only when it seems natural, [for which reason] it must not betray its constitution" (Alexander 2010, 12). For Alexander, the primary goal of political performance was to cloak itself: if a performance was exposed *as* performance,

the jig was up. A little more than a decade later, this is no longer a defensible position. While politics has always been an act, in Trump's wake "[it] has gone Brechtian, its [theatrical] apparatus on full display" (Grobe 2020, 793). The "naturalism" that Alexander identified as a necessary condition of effective political performance had little purchase on Trump, for whom the lines between the reality TV star, the celebrity businessman, and the forty-fifth President of the United States were never clear. Nor did Trump himself ever show much interest in clarifying them: "I'm a total act," Trump told Anthony Scaramucci, "and I don't understand why people don't get it" (Rucker and Leonnig 2020).

In a post-Trump era, reestablishing the ritually idealized boundary between "performance" and "substance" on which naturalistic norms of decorum depend is neither simple nor even necessarily desirable. Sat in the wreckage left by Trump's metatheatrical iconoclasm, the question to ask is not how we might be able to put performance back in its box but rather how to read, theorize, and reckon with its constitutive presence in the fabric of political life. It is Trump's refusal of naturalism, his insistence that the show is all there is, and his Brechtian impulse to expose it for *what* it is, which enables this problem to be posed. It is this, too, that underpins our turn to wrestling. More than any other contemporary political figure, Trump embodies the "emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs" that Barthes identified in the *salauds* of the French music hall.

The Wrestling Repertoire: Four Key Terms

Trump gravitated toward wrestling throughout his business career. Indeed, in a life marked by vacillation and inconsistency toward everyone except himself, the recurring presence of the WWE is a striking anomaly. Trump's resorts frequently hosted WWE events, Trump himself regularly lent his celebrity to WWE promotions, and he even performed in prominent wrestling storylines. The association not only survived Trump's political ascendancy but thrived during his time in office. In 2016, WWE's majority owners Vince and Linda McMahon—contemporary pro-wrestling's *de facto* ruling family—donated seven million dollars to Trump's presidential campaign (AP 2016). This outlay was presumably offset by Linda's 2017 appointment as the head of the Small Business Administration, a post she left in April 2019 to take up the chair of America First Action, a "Super PAC" dedicated to Trump's reelection. In April 2020, on the same day that America First Action pledged to spend \$18.5 million on pro-Trump advertising in Florida, the state's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis designated WWE an "essential business," allowing it to continue recording and broadcasting shows from its "Performance Center" in Orlando despite the state's stay-at-home order, in force due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bundel 2020).

Since Trump announced his presidential run in 2015, multiple attempts have been made to use his historical association with wrestling as a way of illuminating his style and method as a politician. Many of these have come from the field of performance studies, which has engaged seriously with wrestling as a way of dramatizing "norms and tensions that exist in the larger reality beyond the squared circle [of the ring]" (Castleberry et al. 2018, 77; see also Mazer 2018; Warden, Chow, and Laine 2018; O'Brien 2020). Building on this literature, we have identified four key pieces of wrestling argot that offer insight into Trump's behavior at international summits and the challenges he posed to naturalistic norms and codes of foreign policy performance. These are

"heat" and "heel" (which we consider together), "kayfabe" and "cutting a promo." We outline each in turn below.

To play the *heel* is to play the antagonist, and the success with which a wrestler performs this role can be measured by the amount of rambunctious disapproval or censure (known as *heat*) that he or she is able to provoke in his or her audience. This means trash-talk outside the ring and seeking advantage at all costs within it, including by skulduggery or cheating if necessary. It means being relentlessly untrustworthy to the point of sociopathy, breaking the rules when to do so promises victory, and appealing to them when in need of their protection. When all else fails, it means being a bad loser, decrying any defeat as an injustice or a stitch-up. Unlike the heroic, wholesome "babyfaces" against whom they are usually pitted, heels can never truly be admired—yet without one, a wrestling match feels featureless and bland. Heat is the centripetal force that pulls all eyes inward, toward the ring's squared circle and toward the drama that occurs within and around it.

In times of increased political polarization—what Alan Abramowitz and Stephen Webster (2016) have termed "negative partisanship"—heat is a powerful currency. "As partisan identities have become more closely aligned with social, cultural and ideological divisions in American society," Abramowitz and Webster explain, "party supporters including leaning independents have developed increasingly negative feelings about the opposing party and its candidates" (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 12). The result is that "large proportions of Democrats and Republicans now dislike the opposing party and its leaders more than they like their own" (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019, 146). That Trump can effectively and reliably induce others' outrage in this way is clearly a large part of his appeal for those who perceive him to be on their side—and as we shall see, international summits provided opportunities for Trump to generate these reactions on a global stage (Mazer 2018, 186).

Kayfabe refers to the pretension of authenticity that underpins wrestling performance. It denotes "the visible and observable theatrical presentation of a fictional or predetermined world and timeline, which, not incidentally, co-exists neatly with our own" (Laine 2018, 90–91). Some journalistic pieces exploring Trump's historical association with WWE have picked up on kayfabe as indicative of wrestling's "fakeness" or "phoniness," the assumption being that wrestling fans are marks incapable of recognizing the staged nature of the spectacle in front of them (e.g., Gordon 2016). In fact, however, kayfabe is an illusion maintained consciously and collaboratively between wrestlers and their audience: like any theatergoing crowd, wrestling fans are willing temporarily to suspend their disbelief in order to be entertained (Warden, Chow, and Laine 2018).

As such, kayfabe masks no deeper reality or truth but instead denotes a complexly woven tissue of narratives with no concrete foundation beyond the commercial imperatives they serve. These narratives are entirely malleable: heels become babyfaces and babyfaces become heels, storylines that are not "over" with the fans are killed and forgotten about, and mistakes or improvised departures from the script ("shoots") are retrospectively incorporated into storylines (or "angles"). Due to this flexibility, kayfabe is also subject to metatheatrical play: the angles that sustain today's WWE frequently concern the company's corporate machinery or the dressing room quarrels of its stars, while kayfabe can at any time be "broken" with a nod and wink, all in service of the next storyline.

The kayfabe that structures Trump's personal universe must of course be maintained at all costs: in this parallel

timeline, the 2017 inauguration was the best attended of all time, surpassed in glory and magnificence only by the presidency that succeeded it (see O'Brien 2020). Yet, international summits also possess a dense “diplomatic kayfabe” of their own, with their ritually idealized traditions and conventions, archaic linguistic styles, and expectations of naturalistic “decorum.” Trump’s Brechtian betrayal of this naturalism forced other foreign policy practitioners to perform without the prophylactic layer of diplomatic kayfabe that had previously allowed them to disavow performance entirely. Performing next to Trump, their practiced, naturalistic civility looked mechanical and stiff. It is for this reason that for some, Trump’s “failure to perform as the others do ... ma[de] him appear more real, more authentic” (Mazer 2018, 188; see also Moon 2022). Unlike many of his rivals, Trump directly addressed audiences *as* audiences, inviting them to deride the naturalistic repertoires of his rivals. “*Anybody* can act presidential,” Trump said at a rally in 2018, walking soberly up and down the stage a couple of times and delivering a few stuffy platitudes by way of proof. “It’s a lot easier to ‘act presidential’ than to do what I do” (ABC Action News 2018).

International summits and the build-up that preceded them were arenas in which Trump could renew, pursue, or amplify the feuds and angles that animated and sustained his relationship with his audience as well as his own personal kayfabe. Key to his method was the promo. In wrestling, to *cut a promo* is to deliver an in-character vox pop, usually with the intention of trailing an upcoming bout or developing an emerging angle. A good promo should further a wrestler’s own brand, capture the essence of the conflict in which they are consumed, promote any upcoming bouts, belittle any prospective opponent and assure their fans of certain triumph. Trump is a master of this sort of set-piece: his fondness for giving diminutive names to his rivals is a hallmark of wrestling promos, while his aggrandizing and aggressive handshake enabled him to transform seemingly banal set-pieces into compelling displays of masculinity, authority, and dominance.

Summit Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Performance: Trump and Kim in Singapore

The narrative arc of Trump’s feud with North Korea’s Kim Jong-Un began shortly after Trump became the presumptive Republican nominee. In mid-May 2016, Trump raised the prospect of negotiating directly with Kim in an interview with *Reuters*: “I would speak to him, I would have no problem speaking to him” (Holland and Flitter 2016). This represented a dramatic reversal of established US policy toward North Korea, which held that in order to avoid legitimizing Kim and his nuclear program before North Korea had made any concessions, any formal meeting should be the capstone to denuclearization rather than a prelude to it. Jake Sullivan, Hillary Clinton’s chief foreign policy advisor, remarked at the time that Trump’s “approach to foreign policy makes no sense for the rest of us” (Kopan 2016). A month later, Trump brought up his *Reuters* interview at a rally in Atlanta, where he not only lampooned the foreign policy establishment’s derision toward him but also criticized the sensibilities governing their preferred approach to diplomacy. “Trump would speak to him [i.e., Kim]!?” he asked facetiously in a mock-horrified voice. “Who the hell cares? I’ll speak to anybody! ... Hillary is a rank amateur. She’s been doing it forever and she still doesn’t get it ... it’s called opening a dialogue” (Gass 2016).

Three themes that would guide Trump’s performances leading up to and during the 2018 summit with Kim were apparent from the very beginning. First, Trump would assiduously disrupt diplomatic norms with a total disregard for the heat these moves would generate from figures in the foreign policy establishment. Second, this disregard stemmed from Trump’s vision of himself as both protagonist and hero of his own dramatic universe—a vision that informed his framing of any potential engagement with Kim as a highly personalized contest. Trump’s faithfulness to this universe’s kayfabe—a fidelity he naturally also expected those around him to share—contrasted and conflicted with the norms of modesty and decorum that comprised the naturalistic “diplomatic kayfabe” characteristic of more conventional foreign policy performances. These two rival universes, each making separate demands of their performers, would collide at summits and meetings. Third, he would be entirely happy to conduct diplomacy through informal, unofficial channels, via promos cut at rallies or in the media.²

In this section, we explore Trump and Kim’s 2018 summit in Singapore. We first outline the events leading up to their meeting, before moving on to discuss the summit itself. In our conclusion, we reflect on Singapore’s aftermath, focusing on an incident at the 2019 North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] summit in London to assess Trump’s wider impact on foreign policy performance. Our analysis throughout is guided by the themes outlined above, which map onto the concepts identified and discussed in our previous section.

Setting the Stage: 2017–2018

Within a few months of taking office, Trump was already developing the angle that would lead to his summit with Kim. In August 2017, after the *Washington Post* reported that North Korea was capable of miniaturizing nuclear warheads to affix to ballistic missiles, Trump cut a promo to a phalanx of reporters who had gathered at his New Jersey golf club: “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States,” Trump said. “They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen” (Thrush and Baker 2017).

Trump’s exaggerated ad-libs deeply troubled many foreign policy experts, including some of his own advisors. While “President Trump’s aides knew he planned to deliver a tough message to North Korea on Tuesday ...” reported Thrush and Baker (2017), “they did not expect a threat that rivalled the apocalyptic taunts often used by his target.” For those schooled in the modest restraint of diplomatic decorum, Trump’s language was reckless and counterproductive, an unbecomingly direct threat of martial violence. Trump, on the other hand, was pleased with the attention and energy his statement had commanded (Thrush and Baker 2017).

In the wake of Trump’s outburst, the seventy-second session of the United Nations [UN] General Assembly became the “hottest ticket in diplomacy,” according to British Ambassador to the UN Matthew Rycroft (quoted in Falk 2017). “The United States has great strength and patience,” Trump (2017b) declared in his speech on September 19, “but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.” The audible gasps that crackled across the Assembly Hall confirmed

² Our identification of these three themes is consistent with recent scholarship examining the foreign policy impact of Trump’s personality, notably Turner and Kaarbo (2021, 8).

Trump's departure from the expected diplomatic register. Predictably, Kim responded, and the two leaders began trading promos. When the North Koreans took their turn behind the podium at the General Assembly on September 23, Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho referred to Trump as "Mr Evil President," while on the twenty-fourth, Trump tweeted out a variation of his nickname for Kim. He was now "little rocket man." To the foreign policy establishment, this behavior was infantile and dangerous, a diplomatic farce. Nevertheless, both leaders reveled in the exchange, and in the prospective personal showdown it trailed. Their promos, characterized by diminutive nicknames focused on their targets' masculinity ("Mr ...," "... man"), virtue ("... Evil ..."), and capacity for violence ("... rocket ..."), could have come straight from the WWE cutting room floor.

Not too long after his UN speech, musing in his cabin on Air Force One, Trump boasted to White House Staff Secretary Rob Porter how "Little Rocket Man" was his "best nickname ever" (Woodward 2018, 281). Continuing, Trump revealed the extent to which he had internalized the foreign policy challenge of North Korea's nuclear weapons program as a personal, masculinized feud: "This is all about leader versus leader. Man versus man. Me versus Kim" (Woodward 2018, 281). Nevertheless, the prospect of a summit between Trump and Kim appeared a long way off at the start of 2018, when Kim used a New Year's Day address to tout North Korea's nuclear readiness (McCurry 2018). This provoked another Twitter outburst from Trump (2018b):

North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the "Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times." Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!

The heat generated by this flagrant threat of violence, presented in tandem with a vulgar assertion of masculine potency (see Cohn 1987), caused Kim's overtures to South Korea in the same address to be largely overlooked by US commentators. Kim had signified his willingness for North Korea to participate in the Winter Olympic Games, due to begin in the South Korean city of Pyeongchang barely a month later, upending the angle he and Trump had assiduously cultivated over the preceding months (Sonnevend and Kim 2020). Kim was making a "face turn," a calculated switch from heel to babyface in an attempt to defuse some of the heat circulating around him and break free—to some extent at least—from Trump's emasculatory characterization of him in his promos.

Just days after the closing ceremony in Pyeongchang, Kim received a South Korean delegation in Pyongyang led by Chung Eui Yong, the Director of South Korea's National Security Office (Cha and Katz 2018, 89; Woodward 2020, 90). Three days later, on March 8, Chung flew to Washington, DC, to brief US officials. Chung was scheduled to meet with several cabinet officials before an appointment with Trump the following day (Woodward 2018, 90–91). Betraying both his disdain for process and his desire to position himself at the center of the drama, however, Trump invited Chung to the Oval Office as soon as he heard he was at the White House. According to John Bolton, "Chung ... extended Kim's invitation to meet to Trump, who accepted on the spur of the moment" (Bolton 2020, 78; see also Woodward 2018, 90–91). Even more unexpectedly, Trump instructed Chung to announce the agreement immediately. As Woodward reports, "it was unprecedented for such an

important presidential announcement to be made by a foreign official at the White House" (Woodward 2020, 91).

Trump's impulsive decision was taken against the advice and judgment of many in his national security team and completely reversed decades of US diplomatic policy. Neither Secretary of State Rex Tillerson nor Central Intelligence Agency Director Mike Pompeo were directly consulted at the time (Woodward 2020, 94). Members of the foreign policy establishment were almost universally critical. They knew of North Korea's chequered negotiating history and the arduous work that was typically required in the leadup to such a summit. They also knew that "Trump [would] be flying blind into meetings with Kim, acting on little more than his gut instincts ..." (Cha and Katz 2018, 91). Even John Bolton recalls how "the more I learned, the more discouraged and pessimistic I became about a Trump-Kim summit" (Bolton 2020, 77).

Trump's spur of the moment decision to meet Kim makes more sense, however, when understood as a way of centering his personal presence at the heart of international affairs by setting up a box-office showdown with someone occupying the position of a global heel. From this perspective, the prospect of a summit with Kim was irresistible as a dramatic climax to the angle both had been cultivating. Even better, it would instantly relegate Kim's recently agreed summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-In to the undercard, rendering Kim's recent face turn moot and in so doing redrawing the diplomatic boundaries governing nuclear politics on the Korean peninsula in a manner consistent with Trump's narcissistic kayfabe.

Trump's thoughts turned immediately toward promoting the event (Woodward 2020, 91–92). Even before Chung had finalized his statement, Trump made a surprise visit to the White House briefing room "to tease reporters about a major upcoming announcement" on North Korea (Cha and Katz 2018, 89–90). Merchandizing opportunities were also identified. The White House Communications Agency "manufactured a limited run of red, white and blue challenge coins embossed with Trump's silver visage facing off against Kim's" (Rucker, Parker, and Dawsey 2018).

After the summit was announced, an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* responded ambivalently to Trump's recalibration of the norms of foreign policy performance (The Editorial Board 2018). On the one hand, the editorial chastised Trump's departure from "normal diplomacy" and highlighted the risks of Trump's "diplomatic nuclear theatre." On the other hand, however, the piece conceded the summit would be a "show for the ages." Trump's aggrandizing and frequently aggressive performances of masculinized strength and potency had collided with the idealized expectations that more typically defined diplomatic conduct, collapsing the already porous boundaries between statecraft and stagecraft. Jared Kushner would later tell Bob Woodward that "the hardest thing that people have in understanding [Trump] is they see him as fixed, where he's actually, he's not a solid, he's fluid ... —and that's a strength" (Woodward 2020, 262).

The Greatest Show on Earth: Singapore and Beyond

On May 10, 2018, Trump announced via Twitter that his summit with Kim would take place in Singapore on June 12. Just two weeks later, however, he abruptly cancelled the meeting (Rucker, Parker, and Dawsey 2018). This sudden move to abort served an important function, injecting uncertainty and dynamism into a feud that appeared to be petering out, and doing so in a way that made Trump appear to

be firmly in control. Then Trump rapidly backtracked once more. Just twelve hours after announcing the cancellation, Trump ordered staff to get the meeting back on track, following a conciliatory response to his letter from North Korea. In Bolton's view, this reversal-of-a-reversal constituted "an open admission Trump was desperate to have the meeting at any price" and was obsessed with closing "one of the greatest deals in history" (Bolton 2020, 92).

In response, Moon and Kim sought to nudge the narrative in their preferred direction by hastily arranging a second inter-Korean summit following their meeting in Panmunjom in April. Afterward, Moon delivered an address where he conveyed that both leaders "shared a common understanding that the June 12 North Korea-US summit should be held in a successful manner ..." (Moon 2018). This meeting likely played a role in pushing Trump to go ahead with the summit: it was now clear that in the absence of a meeting with Trump, Kim could pursue *rapprochement* with South Korea by himself, cutting Trump out of the headlines and undermining his centrality to the Korean peace process (Bolton 2020, 92). On June 1, Trump hosted Kim Yong-chol, North Korea's top nuclear arms negotiator, at the White House. After the meeting, Trump cut another promo for reporters at the White House: the Summit was back on. According to Bolton, Trump had been unsure "about whether he wanted Singapore to happen" until this point but ultimately decided that "it will be great theatre" (Bolton 2020, 94–95).

Over the following weeks, 2,500 journalists decamped to Singapore to cover the impending meeting. *The Wall Street Journal* billed it as "the greatest show on earth." Reporters filed copy about the price of rooms in the hotels they booked out, the departure times of Kim's private jet, and the security arrangements in place for the summit venue, among other seemingly tangential topics (Fifield and Rucker 2018). One Singaporean, who was interviewed by an international reporter after being spotted trying to take a photograph of Trump's hotel, spoke of his pride that "a small country like ours can have these two big boxers coming in for a fight ..." (Rich 2018). All pretense at decorum had dissipated: this was a showdown.

At the G7 summit in Charlevoix, Canada, mere days before the Singapore summit, Trump again demonstrated his disdain for diplomatic protocol, his insistence on upholding the demands of kayfabe by positioning himself at the center of events, and his willingness to pursue diplomacy through unorthodox, public channels. Trump had left the G7 early to travel to Singapore, but after being angered by comments made by the Canadian Prime Minister and host Justin Trudeau in a news conference after the summit, he withdrew his support for the communique, tweeting his revocation as Air Force One refueled in Greece. Although he was on board at the time, John Bolton had no idea Trump had made this decision: "While I was asleep, Trump had fired off two tweets withdrawing support for the G7 communique, which was unprecedented" (Bolton 2020, 105).

Trump was evidently not concerned by this breach of diplomatic decorum. His mind had moved on to Singapore. But neither was he interested in getting up to speed with the relevant policy details ahead of his meeting with Kim. During the journey to Singapore, Trump cut promos to journalists on Air Force One, highlighting his preternatural negotiating skills and vowing to come up on top with Kim. "Within the first minutes, I'll know, my touch, my feel—that's what I do" (Fifield and Rucker 2018). Otherwise, Trump's attention in the hours leading up to his arrival in Singapore was

focused jealously on the press coverage his rival was receiving (Bolton 2020, 105).

The Singapore Summit was the culmination of "an extraordinary sequence of diplomatic manoeuvres between parties to the Korean peninsula crisis" (International Crisis Group 2018, 1). Although both leaders signed a joint statement, there is disagreement about what was achieved. Landler observed at the time that the statement was "as skimpy as the summit meeting was extravagant," maintaining the traditional, naturalistic boundary between the symbolic and substantial aspects of foreign policy (Landler 2018). According to Margaret Sullivan, in contrast, the Singapore Summit was "a triumph of Trumpian stagecraft." "Because of wall-to-wall media coverage, carefully choreographed visuals and the usual Trumpian bluster," she concluded, "the Singapore summit largely came across as a triumph of personal diplomacy by the president" (Sullivan 2018). Whether or not it had served geostrategic aims, for Sullivan the summit—and the feud animating it—had bolstered the President's appeal by providing a stage on which he could "keep kayfabe" or enact a performance that both upheld the demands of his own personal dramatic universe and developed and amplified his own place within it. The consequences of this "triumph of personal diplomacy" were not insignificant, allowing Trump both to claim authority to his audience at home and burnish his dealmaking credentials. In the process, some of the ritually idealized boundaries that had previously governed politics on the Korean peninsula were redrawn. These included not only the boundaries circumscribing North Korea's exclusion from international affairs but also those of the United States' alliance with South Korea, after Trump unilaterally promised to cease "provocative" war games in the vicinity of the North Korean border (Moon Chung-in 2018).

Naturally, when Trump arrived home, he declared victory: "There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea," he tweeted. Over the next six months, however, after his feud with Kim had reached its apparent conclusion, Trump lost interest in the denuclearization process. While Trump and Kim did meet again at a second summit in Hanoi in late February 2019, it was clear when Trump walked out of the negotiations that the prospects for a grand diplomatic breakthrough had dimmed. A third instalment took place in June 2019 at the Korean Demilitarized Zone [DMZ], after Trump sent Kim a surprise Twitter invitation 24 hours earlier while in Japan for the G20 Summit. While Trump "delighted in the drama of the moment," neither this encounter or the Hanoi summit could offer the same draw as Singapore. The angle, and the feud sustaining it, had faded and was sapped of energy. Trump had other, more profitable angles to pursue.

Conclusion: Foreign Policy Performance after Trump

Six months after his third meeting with Kim, Trump flew to London for the annual NATO summit. Unlike the highly personalized, one-on-one conferences Trump had enjoyed in Singapore, Hanoi, and the Korean DMZ, the multilateral discussions at NATO significantly reduced his capabilities to command the stage. As exemplified by his tweeted withdrawal of support at the G7 the previous year, these meetings staged an uneasy, unsustainable confrontation between Trump's personal kayfabe and the diplomatic kayfabe produced by his interlocutors' naturalistic performances of decorum.

On the summit's second and final morning, footage emerged that had been filmed at the previous night's

reception. It featured a conversation between Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, French President Emmanuel Macron, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Britain's Princess Anne. The group was gossiping about Trump: "He was late because he takes a 40-minute press conference off the top ...," Trudeau said. "I've watched his team's jaws just *drop* to the floor ..." (Karni and Rogers 2019). Although the camera only picked up snippets, there was little doubt about what was going on. The group was laughing and smiling behind Trump's back, forging and reveling in a common identity at his expense—an identity, moreover, based on their shared understanding of naturalistic norms of foreign policy performance. Trump is not like *us*, their joking affirmed, because he cannot *perform* like us: he cannot follow the scripts that govern our staged interactions with one another, and with our audiences. Trump, in short, was the grotesque other whose exclusion defined the ritually idealized boundaries securing their status as "proper" foreign policy professionals and sustained the kayfabe that allowed their own performances to be presented naturalistically, as *the way* to do things.

Trump was and is grotesque, of course. Our performance-oriented recreation of the Singapore Summit demonstrates as much, illustrating Trump's ability to "implode the meanings central to the endogenous norms of diplomacy" by partaking instead in a pantomimic theater of violence more obviously suited to the wrestling ring (Surowiec and Miles 2021, 1). Our analysis draws attention to the latent aggression and masculinist bravado coursing through his performances at international summits. As the NATO incident demonstrates, however, Trump's departure from the institutionalized norms of "decorum" that more conventionally govern foreign policy interactions also brings their boundary-producing functions into sharp focus. In his oily wake, many diplomats are demonstrating a reflexive desire to reassert the naturalistic norms that governed foreign policy performance before his ascendancy. These include Trump's successor: addressing the State Department shortly after taking office, Joe Biden promised to put "diplomacy ... back at the center of our foreign policy" (Biden 2021). For many IR scholars, the temptation is much the same: to return to the old models, with their solemn distinction between substance and style. Yet who is likely to buy into this kayfabe now? And what are the stakes at play in doing so? What do these naturalistic norms, these ritually idealized boundaries, conceal and reproduce? And what can be gleaned from Trump's trampling of them? Three conclusions can be drawn from our analysis.

First, while Trump himself may have departed from the political stage—at least for now—many of the insights that emerge from our wrestling-oriented reading of his performances can be applied to other foreign policy actors. Indeed, feminists have long insisted on the centrality of gender performance to processes of militarization, including those that take place behind the scenes in foreign and defense ministries (Cohn 1987). While these everyday performances differ hugely in form and function from the grand stages of international summits, our account nevertheless shows that summits can serve as a key site where the boundaries that define and legitimize agential identities (including martial masculinities) are performatively produced and idealized.

Second, our analysis is not limited to Trump or to other leaders who indulge in similarly ostentatious performances. Our argument is predicated on the belief that even the naturalized norms of decorum that conventionally govern foreign policy actors depend for their acceptance and

reproduction on theatrical modes of presentation and staging. It is important to ask how these norms might help to constitute certain actors as "sensible", "serious", and "statesmanlike," even as these actors tolerate and often authorize violence, death, and environmental degradation. The question of whether and how to regenerate or renaturalize these norms must, therefore, be accompanied by a reckoning with performance's role in their construction, maintenance, and reproduction.

Third, by developing the category of "foreign policy performance," we seek to make a contribution to this process of reckoning. We make no grand claims about the general applicability of our wrestling heuristic but instead present it as one example of what a performance-oriented approach to the study of foreign policy might look like. Foreign policy takes place on any number of stages (including but not limited to international summits), between any number of actors with any number of priorities, interests, methods, identities, and capabilities. Sometimes it is scripted, but at other times it is improvised. Sometimes (as at the Singapore Summit), it bears formal comparison with an existing genre of theater, but at other times, it might take a less intelligible form, or a form endogenous to the practice of foreign policy itself. We do not map these contingencies but rather argue for the necessity of incorporating their consideration into analysis. It is a necessary move if foreign policy is fully to be accounted for as a creative, productive, boundary-drawing field of international politics.

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