

Lost in Transmission

Bureaucracy, Noise, and Communication
in International Politics

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The difference between war and peace often depends on what states communicate to one another.¹ Yet decision-makers in one state frequently fail to understand what decision-makers in another are trying to say.² Such communication failures—or inability to achieve mutual understanding—impose consequential costs in international politics, creating missed opportunities for cooperation and risking elevated hostility and rivalry between states. Historically, communication failures at key junctures have pushed decision-makers down the road to numerous conflicts, including World War I,³ the Korean War,⁴ and the U.S.-China trade war.⁵ Currently, decision-makers across the globe worry that miscom-

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1. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Robert L. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Robert L. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2008); Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Joshua D. Kertzer, Ryan Brutger, and Kai Quek, "Perspective-Taking and Security Dilemma Thinking: Experimental Evidence from China and the United States," *World Politics*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (April 2024), pp. 334–378, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2024.a924509>.

2. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*; Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy*; Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek, "Perspective-Taking and Security Dilemma Thinking."

3. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), p. xxiv.

4. Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

5. Bob Davis and Lingling Wei, *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2020).

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munication between the United States and China could push the world's two strongest economic and military powers toward conflict.⁶

Under what conditions does communication between states fail? Existing scholarship emphasizes two central pathways to communication failure. The first is perceived insincerity of the sender—or judgments that a country's behavior will not live up to its decision-makers' statements.⁷ Leaders frequently misrepresent themselves during bargaining, meaning that communication can fail because receivers doubt whether the sender is telling the truth.⁸ Whether states can achieve mutual understanding thus hinges on factors that bestow the perception of sincerity, such as an action's costliness,⁹ the balance of power,¹⁰ reputation,¹¹ regime or leader attributes,¹² and personal impres-

6. See, for example: Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwan-china-true-sources-deterrence>; Michael J. Mazarr, "The Looming Crisis in the South China Sea," *Foreign Affairs*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/looming-crisis-south-china-sea>; Evan S. Medeiros, "The Delusion of Peak China," *Foreign Affairs*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/delusion-peak-china-united-states-evan-medeiros>; Zhou Bo, "America, China, and the Trap of Fatalism," *Foreign Affairs*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-china-and-trap-fatalism>; Odd Arne Westad, "Sleepwalking Toward War," *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/sleepwalking-toward-war-united-states>; Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "The Most Dangerous Game," *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/most-dangerous-game>.

7. Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Personal Touch: Leaders' Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September 2012), pp. 560–573, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2012.00731.x>.

8. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*.

9. James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), pp. 68–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002797041001004>; Kai Quek, "Four Costly Signaling Mechanisms," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (May 2021), pp. 537–549, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420001094>.

10. Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 919–935, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12082>; Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, "Conceal or Reveal? Managing Clandestine Military Capabilities in Peacetime Competition," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Winter 2019/20), pp. 48–83, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00367.

11. Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Spring 2015), pp. 473–495, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000393>.

12. James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577–592, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944796>; Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 35–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818308080028>; Roseanne W. McManus, *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael C. Horowitz et al., "Sizing Up the Adversary: Leader Attributes and Coercion in International Conflict,"

sions.¹³ A second pathway is receiver misperception—or when communication fails because information processing errors, cognitive biases, or ineffective decision-making in the receiving country lead the receiving country's leaders to make inaccurate inferences about a sending country's message.¹⁴

Yet history is replete with examples of states failing to arrive at mutual understanding, even when senders were perceived as sincere and receivers processed information effectively. At the peak of the Cuban missile crisis, for example, U.S. decision-makers struggled to understand Soviet willingness to reach a peaceful resolution, in part because the Kremlin dispatched strikingly contradictory cables within days of each other.¹⁵ During the 2017 Korean nuclear crisis, it was not ineffective decision-making in Pyongyang that led North Korean officials to misunderstand the United States' messages; they misunderstood the messages because White House officials had "so clearly contradicted the President."¹⁶

This article sheds light on such cases by developing an alternative logic of communication failure, whereby a state's bureaucratic institutions shape the noisiness of interstate communication. Our institutional theory of communication failure makes two core claims. First, drawing on information theory, we argue that *transmission noise*—when a sender's intended meaning is corrupted or changed before it reaches a receiver—impedes communication between states.¹⁷ In international politics, an important source of transmission noise is

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13. Brian C. Rathbun, *Diplomacy's Value: Creating Security in 1920s Europe and the Contemporary Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy*; Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Minseon Ku and Jennifer Mitzen, "The Dark Matter of World Politics: System Trust, Summits, and State Personhood," *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Fall 2022), pp. 799–829, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818322000169>; Kelly Matush, "Harnessing Backlash: How Leaders Can Benefit from Antagonizing Foreign Actors," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (July 2023), pp. 902–918, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000370>.

14. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Brian C. Rathbun, *Reasoning of State: Realists, Romantics, and Rationality in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

15. Serhii Plokhy, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021), pp. 209–214.

16. Evan Osnos, "The Risk of Nuclear War with North Korea," *New Yorker*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/18/the-risk-of-nuclear-war-with-north-korea>.

17. C. E. Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *Bell System Technical Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (July 1948), pp. 379–423, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-7305.1948.tb01338.x>.

the division of labor within states. Coordination and agency problems between leaders (presidents, prime ministers, and dictators) and their foreign policy bureaucrats can alter a leader's meaning as bureaucrats compose, encode, and broadcast that meaning as signals—words or actions intended to convey the leader's message. As a result, the message that the receiving state obtains can differ from what the sending leader intended.

Our second claim is that the structure of *bureaucratic institutions*—the formal and informal rules and procedures defining how leaders and bureaucrats interact—can raise or lower the level of transmission noise.¹⁸ Open institutions, or rules prescribing routinized contact and information flow between leaders and bureaucrats, reduce transmission noise. Closed institutions, or rules that impede leader-bureaucrat information flow, increase transmission noise. In short, our theory explains communication failures *between* states as a function of institutional structures *within* states.

To probe the theory, the article analyzes signal transmission processes on the sender side before and after major institutional reforms in India during the mid-1960s. The paired comparison provides strong analytical leverage to demonstrate how institutions change transmission noise levels, holding constant other sender-side attributes, such as regime type, that may also shape communication. For each period, we measure India's institutional structure generally, identifying differences in rules and procedures for coordination and monitoring. To capture how institutional changes affected international communication in this period, we apply process-tracing to an especially rich set of primary source documents that cover two crises immediately before and after India's institutional reforms: the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War.¹⁹ We analyze archival materials from six different countries—China, India, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States—to trace to what extent the bureaucracy transmitted the leader's preferred messages.²⁰ Our analysis shows how sender-side institu-

18. Institutions here denote rules that structure how players—in this case, leaders and bureaucrats—interact.

19. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

20. Our empirical approach builds on scholarship that uses experiments and analyzes decision-making on sender-receiver gaps to illuminate how sender-side bureaucratic inefficiencies change the substantive meaning of messages, leading interstate communication to break down. On sender-receiver gaps in experiments, see Kai Quek, "Are Costly Signals More Credible? Evidence of Sender-Receiver Gaps," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (July 2016), pp. 925–940, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685751>. On decision-making analyses, see: Hall and Yarhi-Milo, "The Personal Touch"; Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and

tional pathologies contributed to receiver-side misunderstanding. In 1962, India's closed institutions produced ample transmission noise, which created misunderstanding during negotiations with China. In contrast, in 1965, India's reformed institutions minimized noise during negotiations with Pakistan, thereby setting conditions for mutual understanding at the Tashkent summit the following year.

Our theory and findings illuminate a new and underappreciated mechanism by which communication between states breaks down. Traditionally, scholars suggest that sender-receiver gaps stem from the baseline noise of the international system,²¹ coupled with *receiver* errors, such as psychological biases²² and organizational inefficiencies.²³ But international communication is a two-way street. Our argument substantiates how *senders* can contribute to misunderstanding via transmission noise. Some misunderstandings originate in the bureaucracy's inability to effectively articulate what leaders want to say. This article demonstrates the critical and underexamined role that the sender's side plays in communication failures.

Credibility of Signaling in Secret," *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), pp. 124–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1243921>; Roseanne W. McManus and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Logic of 'Offstage' Signaling: Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power–Protégé Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Fall 2017), pp. 701–733, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818317000297>.

21. Erik J. Dahl, *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013); Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, *Intelligence Success and Failure: The Human Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Azusa Katagiri and Eric Min, "The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113, No. 1 (February 2019), pp. 156–172, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000643>.

22. Alexander L. George, "Crisis Management: The Interaction of Political and Military Considerations," *Survival*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (1984), pp. 223–234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338408442197>; Marika Landau-Wells, "Dealing with Danger: Threat Perception and Policy Preferences" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018), <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/118222>; Kathleen E. Powers and Dan Altman, "The Psychology of Coercion Failure: How Reactance Explains Resistance to Threats," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (January 2023), pp. 221–238, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12711>.

23. Graham Allison and Philip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999); Robert Schub, "Informing the Leader: Bureaucracies and International Crises," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (2022), pp. 1460–1476, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000168>; Nicholas D. Anderson, "Push and Pull on the Periphery: Inadvertent Expansion in World Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Winter 2022/23), pp. 136–173, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00454; Don Casler, "Credibility, Organizational Politics, and Crisis Decision Making," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, online first, August 24, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241268586>; Shannon P. Carcelli, "Bureaucratic Structure and Compliance with International Agreements," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (January 2024), pp. 177–192, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12811>; Tyler Jost, "The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation in China's International Crises," *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Summer 2023), pp. 47–90, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00464.

These insights into the deleterious effects of noise on international communication have important implications for the study of war more broadly. Communication failure and the onset of war are two distinct phenomena. Yet incomplete information and miscalculation rank among the most important reasons that state leaders decide to use military force.²⁴ Our theoretical framework provides an original logic that explains variation in the clarity of signals available to receivers as they decide whether to accept the gamble of war, including during two critical historical cases. In the Sino-Indian War, we show that New Delhi's noisy signals led Beijing to make inaccurate assessments that prompted the onset of the conflict. In the Indo-Pakistani War, our analysis demonstrates how senders can help receivers avoid misperception, even when the receiver's decision-making institutions are primed for communication errors because of poor coordination and monitoring.²⁵

Drawing attention to sender-side bureaucratic institutions has important implications for contemporary policymakers as well. The theory and findings illustrate how unclear communication rooted in institutional pathologies may undermine communication strategies aimed at coercion, reassurance, and crisis management. But the argument and analysis also demonstrate how institutional solutions to these pathologies—such as leaders regularly interacting with and monitoring bureaucratic agents—can improve communication. In the future, effective diplomacy between countries ranging from the United States and China to India and Pakistan may depend in part on whether leaders can solve their institutional problems through these or other measures that decrease the noisiness of communication between states.²⁶

The article proceeds as follows. The first section develops an institutional theory of international communication failures that focuses on the sending side. We introduce the concept of transmission noise as a pathway to miscommunication and then theorize how bureaucratic institutions affect the noisiness of signal transmissions. The second section describes the research design,

24. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1988), pp. 35–56; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033324>; Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 159–177.

25. Tyler Jost, *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

26. On the importance of effective communication between these states, see: Emily Kilcrease, "America's China Strategy Has a Credibility Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, May 7, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-china-strategy-has-credibility-problem>; Carter Malkasian, "America's Crisis of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, September 20, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-crisis-deterrence>.

including our case selection criteria, approach to measurement, and data collection process. The third and fourth sections present the cases. The fifth section considers alternative explanations for communication success and failure in our case studies. The conclusion discusses implications for the study of international politics and for policymakers.

An Institutional Theory of International Communication Failure

Communication—the exchange of information—is a pivotal part of international politics. States communicate to articulate positions, make demands, offer concessions, debate policies, and render judgments.²⁷ These communications typically take the form of *signals*: statements (e.g., a *démarche*, remarks during a face-to-face meeting) or actions (e.g., military mobilization) intended to convey meaning between a sender and a receiver.²⁸ Shared understanding between sender and receiver is a cardinal goal of these signals. Successful communication is thus defined as when the receiver infers the same meaning from the statement or action that the sender intended; unsuccessful communication is when receivers infer a meaning that is different from what the sender intended.

Previous scholarship emphasizes two central challenges to reaching mutual understanding. One roadblock stems from the receiver's perceptions of the sender's sincerity—subjective judgments concerning “the likelihood that a state will behave in a manner consistent with its leaders' statements and promises.”²⁹ Looming over these strategic interactions is a sending state's ability to misrepresent itself. Such potential for misrepresentation forces a receiver to judge whether the sender is telling the truth. In this view, effective communication occurs when situational or dispositional factors surrounding a signal's transmission—such as past behavior,³⁰ signal costliness,³¹ regime type,³² and leader attributes³³—convey sincerity. Across these theoretical models, whether

27. Thomas Risse, “‘Let's Argue!': Communicative Action in World Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551109>.

28. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, pp. 20–21.

29. Hall and Yarhi-Milo, “The Personal Touch,” p. 560.

30. Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation.”

31. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests.”

32. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*; Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs.”

33. Horowitz et al., “Sizing Up the Adversary”; Andrew Kenealy, Trent Ollerenshaw, and So Jin Lee, “Observable Bounds of Rationality and Credibility in International Relations,” *Journal of Politics*, forthcoming, <https://doi.org/10.1086/735454>.

a message is informative has more to do with the sender's characteristics and how they communicate than with the message's substance.

There is more to effective communication, however, than knowing whether the sender is telling the truth. A second challenge to mutual understanding lies in misperception—subjective differences in how communicators understand the same message. These gaps between sender meaning and receiver interpretation can stem from cognitive biases, such as motivated reasoning and reactance.³⁴ Gaps may also stem from organizational inefficiencies that prevent delivery of complete or accurate information to decision-makers in the receiving state,³⁵ or from other intelligence failures.³⁶

The receiver's ability to understand the sender's message depends in part on the message's substantive properties—that is, its literal contents and their subjective meaning. In everyday communication, some messages are complete and precisely articulate what an individual means, whereas other messages omit critical information or are imprecise. Thus, sender-receiver gaps may stem from not only receiver errors but also the sender's transmissions. This intuition suggests two questions. First, how can a sender transmit their substantive meaning to the receiver as they intend? Second, what conditions moderate these pathways to information loss? We discuss each in turn.

THE SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO AND STATES' DIVISION OF LABOR

To conceptualize how states can reliably communicate meaning, we turn to information theory—a field of communication studies that focuses on the reliable transmission of messages across channels.

Drawing on Claude Shannon's canonical framework, we model communication as a four-step process: A sender (1) encodes intended meaning into a signal that is (2) broadcast over a channel (i.e., a medium or interaction jointly accessible to sender and receiver) before a receiver (3) collects and (4) decodes the signal.³⁷ Here, encoding denotes selecting a signal to convey a sender's in-

34. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Joshua D. Kertzer, Brian C. Rathbun, and Nina Srinivasan Rathbun, "The Price of Peace: Motivated Reasoning and Costly Signaling in International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Winter 2020), pp. 95–118, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000328>; Powers and Altman, "The Psychology of Coercion Failure."

35. Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980); Schub, "Informing the Leader."

36. Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962); Bar-Joseph and McDermott, *Intelligence Success and Failure*; Jeffrey A. Friedman, *War and Chance: Assessing Uncertainty in International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

37. Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication."

tended meaning, broadcasting denotes revealing the signal, collection denotes detecting the signal, and decoding denotes inferring the sender's meaning from the signal.

Information theory emphasizes three properties of communication channels. First, introducing *noise* into the channel degrades communication. Noise is defined as a change to a signal's substantive meaning while in transit between source and destination.³⁸ As a result, the message that the receiver obtains is different from what the source transmitted. Second, different channels feature different signal-to-noise ratios—or rates at which the transmitter sends the source's intended message relative to changed or corrupted messages. In systems with high signal-to-noise ratios, the source's message is "strong" because a high proportion of messages transmitted through the channel reflect the source's intended meaning. In systems with low signal-to-noise ratios, the source's message is "weak" because there is a high number of noisy messages transmitted through the channel. Third, a transmitter's internal properties shape the signal-to-noise ratio. In short, the signal-to-noise ratio is a variable that depends in part on the properties of the transmitter.

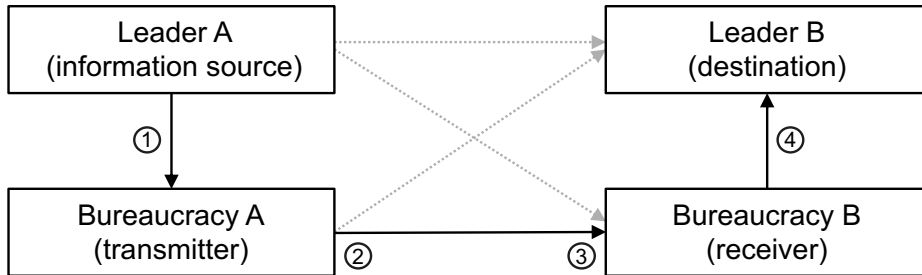
THE ORGANIZATIONAL ORIGINS OF SENDER TRANSMISSION NOISE

We argue that communication between states follows an analogous process. Our core contention is that the division of labor between leaders and bureaucrats can introduce transmission noise during communications with other states.³⁹ Figure 1 depicts a stylized configuration of interstate communication. While leaders may sometimes speak directly (dotted gray lines), they regularly delegate communication to bureaucrats (black lines). If leaders rather than the bureaucrats who serve them are responsible for deciding the most consequential matters of international politics, then it makes sense to evaluate how mes-

38. While our interest is in mutual understanding rather than cooperation or peace, existing literature generally suggests that mutual understanding tends to facilitate cooperation, whereas noise undermines it. See, for example: Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, "Tacit Bargaining and Arms Control," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1987), pp. 297–325, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010222>; Richard Ned Lebow, *The Art of Bargaining* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Yet there may be conditions under which states cooperate despite misunderstandings. See, for example: Eric Grynawski, *Constructive Illusions: Misperceiving the Origins of International Cooperation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

39. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, p. 116.

Figure 1. A Model of Interstate Communication with Divided Labor



SOURCE: Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication."

NOTE: Solid black lines denote the path of an interstate signal with divided labor between leaders and the foreign policy bureaucracy. Each numbered circle represents a part of Shannon's model: (1) encoding; (2) broadcast; (3) collection; and (4) decoding. Dotted gray lines denote alternative communication paths between leaders.

sages change between these two "leader nodes." In this study we theorize the sending side.

In international communication, noise generally falls into two categories.⁴⁰ Noise can arise when bureaucrats dispatch written or verbal messages that deviate from the meaning that the leader wishes to convey. It can also arise when a bureaucratic action, such as a military mobilization, conveys meaning to receivers in other states that differs from what the leader intended. Put differently, in a world without delegation, the leader would have chosen a different set of words or actions that more accurately conveyed what they meant.⁴¹ In both cases, noise is analogous to a game of "telephone," in which the meaning of the initial word or phrase changes as each player whispers their interpretation of the message to the next player.⁴²

40. While our study treats verbal and nonverbal noise as analogous, future scholarship might consider whether they follow different logics.

41. This path to misunderstanding is different from situations when both leaders and bureaucrats fail to accurately predict the meaning that the receiver will infer from either the leader's or bureaucrat's actions.

42. Taylor N. Carlson, "Through the Grapevine: Informational Consequences of Interpersonal Political Communication," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (2019), pp. 325–339, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541900008X>. Note that in our framework, we do not categorize a leader's intentional change of message (i.e., signal fluctuation) as noise. Similarly, noise is not the same as substantive complexity (i.e., topics that require technical skill or expertise to understand).

We identify two logics by which leaders and bureaucracies introduce transmission noise.⁴³ First, *coordination problems* can lead the transmitting bureaucracy to misunderstand what its leader wants to convey.⁴⁴ One possibility is that leaders introduce noise because they fail to compose messages that accurately represent their intended meaning. These composition issues can stem from human error (e.g., a slip of the tongue in meetings with subordinates), when leaders accidentally send messages that differ from the desired signal. Problems can also result from a leader's own ability to engage in strategic reasoning or self-control. For example, President Trump's 2017 threat to rain "fire and fury" on North Korea contrasted sharply with his apparent desire for rapprochement with Pyongyang.⁴⁵ The signals that leaders directly transmit to other state actors (gray lines in figure 1) or indirectly transmit through their own state agents (black lines in figure 1) can thus differ substantively from their intended meaning.

Another possibility is that transmitting bureaucracies introduce noise by failing to accurately encode the signal because they misunderstand what the leader wants.⁴⁶ Even when their preferences are aligned, leaders and bureaucrats may struggle to speak with one voice. In the absence of routine interactions and standard procedures for formulating policy, bureaucrats may be left to speculate about how the leader would respond. Before the Persian Gulf War, the White House and State Department opposed Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. Yet U.S. ambassador April Glaspie did not have a *démarche* from Washington in hand when she met with Saddam Hussein in July 1990, so she merely reiterated the long-standing U.S. policy that border disputes should be resolved through negotiations rather than force.⁴⁷ Lack of coordination among

43. On principal-agent theory, see Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

44. I. M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy: The Politics of Organizational Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

45. On difference in self-control and strategic reasoning between leaders, see: Rathbun, *Reasoning of State*; Reid B. C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Winter 2022/23), pp. 9–51, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00451; Reid B. C. Pauly, "Damned If They Do, Damned If They Don't: The Assurance Dilemma in International Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Summer 2024), pp. 91–132, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00488.

46. Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (June 1992), p. 304, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1964222>.

47. Norman Kempster, "Insider: U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Muzzled by Washington," *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-02-05-wr-840-story.html>; "A Bum Rap for April Glaspie—Saddam and the Start of the Iraq War," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, February 2016, <https://adst.org/2016/02/a-bum-rap-for-april>.

bureaucracies can also lead them to interpret the leader's intended meaning differently and transmit different messages as a result. For instance, after a North Korean submarine sank the South Korean corvette, *Cheonan*, in 2010, unclear guidance from the Chinese leadership led the foreign ministry and military to release contradictory statements.⁴⁸

Second, *agency problems* can lead the transmitting bureaucracy to introduce noise by deliberately modifying the substance of the message even if it understands what the leader wants to convey. Leaders and bureaucrats consider international signaling from different perspectives,⁴⁹ have access to different information,⁵⁰ and thus may disagree over the optimal message to transmit. Moreover, signaling strategies affect bureaucratic organizations' parochial interests, which may motivate them to prefer different signals.⁵¹ As a result, the leader's intended message is corrupted or changed by bureaucrats willfully refusing to transmit it or deliberately transmitting a different message. In a public message early in the Korean War to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, for instance, General Douglas MacArthur characterized President Harry Truman's arguments for decreasing defense commitments toward Taiwan as the "fallacious" and "threadbare" position of officials who "do not understand" the region.⁵²

SENDER TRANSMISSION NOISE AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Transmission noise produces gaps between sender and receiver mutual understanding in two ways. First, it degrades message integrity by corrupting its contents. If bureaucrats in the transmitting state misunderstand or disregard the leader's intended message, they may "inadvertently, if not deliberately, give unclear or misleading signals to officials in other countries."⁵³

Second, transmission noise creates message inconsistency, or "mixed sig-

glaspie-saddam-and-the-start-of-the-iraq-war/; Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 21–22.

48. M. Taylor Fravel, "The PLA and National Security Decisionmaking: Insights from China's Territorial and Maritime Disputes," in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 258–259.

49. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*; Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*.

50. Schub, "Informing the Leader."

51. Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, pp. 352–355.

52. "MacArthur 'Directed' to Withdraw Message on Formosa to V.F.W.," *New York Times*, August 28, 1950, <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/08/28/archives/macarthur-directed-to-withdraw-message-on-formosa-to-vfw-marthur-is.html>; "Texts of Controversial MacArthur Message and Truman's Formosa Statement," *New York Times*, August 29, 1950, <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/08/29/archives/texts-of-controversial-macarthur-message-and-trumans-formosa.html>.

53. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, p. 115.

nals,”⁵⁴ which occur when bureaucracies simultaneously transmit corrupted and uncorrupted signals. The presence of noise alongside the leader’s intended signal impairs the receiver’s ability to separate relevant and irrelevant details—what social psychologists call “dilution effects.”⁵⁵ When provided with noisy information, receivers tend to discard even the important pieces in making their judgments.

In addition, mixed signals can exacerbate receivers’ cognitive biases. When presented with multiple contradictory signals, negativity bias may lead receivers to overvalue signals that support worst-case outcomes rather than the sender’s intent.⁵⁶ Receivers often assume duplicity, rather than mere incoherence, when they receive multiple, inconsistent messages.⁵⁷ Contradictory signals further exacerbate motivated reasoning, such that receivers overvalue signals that support their prior beliefs.⁵⁸ As the communication channel becomes noisier, contradictory information introduces ambiguity, which leads receivers to fall back on their worldviews and values rather than attempt to decipher inconsistent signals.

In sum, domestic institutional pathologies introduce transmission noise to international communication, which in turn degrades the receiver’s ability to understand the sender’s message. Under what conditions are such pathologies more pernicious—and, as a result, when is transmission noise more likely to drown out the leader’s signal?

BUREAUCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND TRANSMISSION NOISE

We argue that the structure of domestic bureaucratic institutions affects the level of transmission noise by shaping the state’s ability to solve coordination and agency problems. Following Douglass North, we define institutions as the

54. William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 298.

55. Richard E. Nisbett, Henry Zukier, and Ronald E. Lemley, “The Dilution Effect: Nondiagnostic Information Weakens the Implications of Diagnostic Information,” *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 1981), pp. 248–277, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285\(81\)90010-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(81)90010-4).

56. Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, “Bad World: The Negativity Bias in International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Winter 2018/19), pp. 96–140, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00336.

57. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 340.

58. Paul M. Sniderman and Sean M. Theriault, “The Structure of Political Argument and the Logic of Issue Framing,” in Willem E. Saris and Paul M. Sniderman, eds., *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 133–165; Kertzer, Rathbun, and Rathbun, “The Price of Peace.”

formal and informal rules and procedures that establish the roles, constraints, and expectations of actors.⁵⁹ Bureaucratic institutions are thus the rules that structure interactions between political leaders and a state's bureaucratic organizations responsible for implementing foreign policy actions. If electoral institutions are the rules shaping leader selection (e.g., by popular vote, as in a democracy), bureaucratic institutions are the rules that shape how bureaucrats interact with their political leaders.

One of the central ways that states differ from one another is the level of institutional openness between leaders and the bureaucracy.⁶⁰ We define open institutional structures as rules and norms that standardize how leaders and bureaucrats interact, creating stable procedures for how to deliver advice and formulate policy. Establishing coordination routines, for example, provides opportunities for leaders and bureaucrats to get into the same room and onto the same page. As Robert Keohane posits, "Forums for meetings and secretariats . . . can act as catalysts for agreement . . . establishing rules and principles at the outset makes it unnecessary to renegotiate them each time a specific question arises."⁶¹ During the Dwight Eisenhower administration, the United States adopted mechanisms alongside the U.S. National Security Council—such as the Planning Board, Operations Coordination Board, and Special Assistant for National Security Affairs—to facilitate these internal connections.⁶²

Institutional openness affects the level of transmission noise that the state emits. First, open structures help leaders solve coordination problems by allowing them to provide guidance to their bureaucratic representatives. During the John F. Kennedy administration, for example, the National Security Council crafted and disseminated hundreds of "action memos" to provide explicit policy guardrails to subordinate bureaucracies engaged in signaling activity.⁶³ In China, one of the primary functions of the Central Committee

59. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 4–5.

60. Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*.

61. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 90.

62. Anna Kasten Nelson, "The 'Top of Policy Hill': President Eisenhower and the National Security Council," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (October 1983), pp. 307–326, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1983.tb00397.x>.

63. Bromley K. Smith, *Organizational History of the National Security Council During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (Washington, DC: National Security Council, 1988), p. 23.

General Office is to issue “central directives” (*zhongfa*) to subsidiary organizations, such as the military and the foreign ministry.⁶⁴ Open structures also ease the costs of extracting additional guidance when bureaucrats are unsure or when existing guidance proves insufficient for new or complex circumstances. In short, open structures connect leaders with bureaucrats and bureaucrats with one another. These connections increase the odds that states consistently transmit the leader’s intended communication.

Second, open structures help leaders solve agency problems because they establish feedback loops for leaders to monitor the accuracy of messages. When leaders and bureaucrats routinely interact, leaders can check that the information flowing between them is accurate and that subordinates have carried out their instructions as given. Clear guidance from the leader reduces bureaucrats’ ability to blame noncompliance on imprecise instructions. Consequently, leaders can discipline bureaucrats who deviate from the leader’s intended message. The openness of this process also allows other bureaucrats to monitor one other, identifying when peers transmit unauthorized signals. Furthermore, knowing that open structures improve the leader’s ability to monitor them may deter bureaucrats from transmitting signals that deviate from the leader’s intent.

Not all states possess open structures. Many possess closed structures that either establish rules precluding leader-bureaucrat interaction or exhibit loose or nonexistent procedures for delivering advice or formulating policy.⁶⁵ For example, one of the critical flaws in Imperial Germany’s institutions before World War I was an absence of “governmental processes” for sharing information between bureaucrats.⁶⁶

Closed structures increase transmission noise in two ways. First, because the left hand of the state does not know what the right hand is doing, leaders and

64. Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 153.

65. For a similar logic emphasizing organizational designs that are suboptimal for battlefield performance and assessment, see: Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). See also: Amy B. Zegart, “September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 78–111, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.29.4.78>; Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, “Cheater’s Dilemma: Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Path to War,” *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Summer 2020), pp. 51–89, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00382.

66. Holger H. Herwig, “Imperial Germany,” in Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One’s Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 89–90, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856060.62>.

bureaucrats are more likely to transmit different messages. Even if leaders and bureaucrats prefer the same outcome, they still may send inconsistent messages because each is unaware of what the other knows. Second, closed structures can impede monitoring. If leaders and the bureaucracy interact less, leaders have fewer opportunities to ensure that bureaucratic communications align with their preferred strategy. Weak linkages between leaders and bureaucrats afford greater space for the latter to send their preferred message in defiance of the leader.

Closed structures therefore carry consequences for states' communication abilities. For example, the Richard Nixon administration was a comparatively closed structure. It centralized information-gathering and decision-making authority in the White House and the National Security Council, intentionally marginalizing other bureaucratic actors. Consequently, the president struggled to leverage an alert of U.S. nuclear forces as a signal to the Soviet Union about expediting the end of the Vietnam War. After having been deliberately kept in the dark about the purpose of the nuclear mobilization, military leaders selectively implemented Nixon's orders. General Bruce Holloway, the head of Strategic Air Command (SAC), successfully lobbied against dispersing his bomber forces to protect SAC's organizational resources.⁶⁷ Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird recalled intentionally "using a bit of the delay tactic" to prevent SAC exercises from getting "all fouled up" by a nuclear alert that he thought was unwise, if not dangerous.⁶⁸

As summarized in table 1, our theory argues that the structure of bureaucratic institutions helps to explain the success and failure of international communication before, during, and after conflict by changing the signal-to-noise ratio. In closed structures, domestic coordination and agency problems introduce transmission noise into communication channels between states. Noise degrades mutual understanding because the receivers obtain less accurate, inconsistent communications from the sender. In contrast, open structures minimize the level of transmission noise by improving coordination and monitoring, allowing receivers to draw inferences from a set of signals that reflect the leader's intended meaning.

67. Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 167–171, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951126>. On the institutional structure of the Nixon administration, see Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served: From JFK to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), chap. 3.

68. Sagan and Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert," p. 171.

Table 1. An Institutional Theory of International Communication Failure

Sender's bureaucratic institutions (independent variable)	Transmission noise (intervening variable)	Mutual understanding (dependent variable)
<p>OPEN</p> <p>Sending state possesses inclusive advisory bodies with minimal vacancies, staff support, and standardized policymaking procedures.</p>	<p>LOW</p> <p>Sending state leaders coordinate and monitor bureaucrats' signal encoding and broadcasting, which reduces transmission noise.</p>	<p>HIGH</p> <p>Receiving state obtains accurate and consistent messages.</p>
<p>CLOSED</p> <p>Sending state possesses insular advisory bodies (or none at all), featuring vacancies, limited staff support, and ad hoc policymaking procedures.</p>	<p>HIGH</p> <p>Sending state leaders do not coordinate and monitor bureaucrats' signal encoding and broadcasting, which increases transmission noise.</p>	<p>LOW</p> <p>Receiving state obtains inaccurate and inconsistent messages.</p>

Three additional points are worth noting. First, receiver-side errors can still introduce noise into the communication channel, whether because of cognitive biases,⁶⁹ parochial and dispositional tendencies that color how the receiving bureaucracy understands signals,⁷⁰ or incentives for the bureaucracy to withhold information from the leader.⁷¹ In this article, we intentionally set aside the receiver-side dynamics that other scholars examine. Our argument is that all else equal, transmission-side institutions can degrade or improve mutual understanding above the baseline level of difficulty that receiver-side factors introduce.

Second, while receivers could theoretically weight noise differently depending on characteristics of the sender's institutions,⁷² there are several reasons to think they do not do so. For one, unlike other domestic institutions (e.g., those

69. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Rathbun, *Diplomacy's Value*; Kertzer, Rathbun, and Rathbun, "The Price of Peace."

70. Schub, "Informing the Leader"; Casler, "Credibility, Organizational Politics, and Crisis Decision Making"; Tyler Jost et al., "Advisers and Aggregation in Foreign Policy Decision Making," *International Organization*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Winter 2024), pp. 1–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818323000280>.

71. Braut-Hegghammer, "Cheater's Dilemma."

72. On applying a similar logic to competitive elections, see Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*. On applying a similar logic to violations of the laws of war, see James D. Morrow, "When Do States Follow the Laws of War?," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 3 (August 2007), pp. 559–572, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540707027X>. On applying a similar logic to concealing war plans, see Brandon K. Yoder and William Spaniel, "Costly Concealment: Secret Foreign

for selecting political leaders), it is difficult for receivers to observe those characteristics that govern the leader's foreign policy decision-making. For instance, contemporaries (incorrectly) suggested that Eisenhower was disengaged from day-to-day policymaking when, in fact, he directly oversaw the signals that Washington dispatched during crises over Dien Bien Phu, Taiwan, and Berlin.⁷³ In addition, receivers tend to overestimate the level of centralization within other states.⁷⁴ During the Cuban missile crisis, for example, both the Soviet Union and the United States assumed that the highest levels of government must have approved the other side's signals.⁷⁵

Third, one might wonder whether strong political leadership, in itself, is sufficient to solve coordination and agency problems. Yet even strong leaders need mechanisms that relay instructions to the bureaucracy about what message to dispatch, at what time, and to what end. Dismantling such routines can impair international communication, even under politically strong leaders who can severely punish the bureaucracy.⁷⁶ For example, during the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong shifted toward a more closed structure, making far less use of formal decision-making bodies while siloing information flows from diplomatic and military advisers.⁷⁷ Thereafter, during the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, Chinese Defense Minister Lin Biao based his order to mobilize China's nuclear forces on a misunderstanding of Mao Zedong's intent, as the paperwork overseeing the proposed mobilization was misrouted between Lin and Mao.⁷⁸ Still, political strength may magnify the salubrious effects of open institutions, affording leaders the ability to punish bureaucrats who fail to comply with messaging instructions—and perhaps providing room to establish open institutions in the first place.

Conversely, one might also wonder whether weak political leadership undercuts institutional solutions to coordination problems. Open structure may be insufficient to reduce transmission noise when bureaucrats can undermine weak leaders' prospects for political survival (e.g., when a defense minister

Policymaking, Transparency, and Credible Reassurance," *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Fall 2022), pp. 868–900, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818322000248>.

73. Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

74. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 319–320.

75. Lebow, *The Art of Bargaining*, pp. 171–172.

76. In this way, openness is conceptually distinct from domestic regime type.

77. Jost, "The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation," p. 65.

78. Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), p. 318.

mounts a coup or when a foreign minister leaks politically damaging information). If leaders have lost this fundamental level of control, bureaucrats are likely to transmit signals without regard for what the leader wants. This suggests a scope condition to the institutional component of our theory: Transmission noise may remain high regardless of institutional design in political environments where political leaders are too weak to control the bureaucracy.

Research Design

To illustrate our institutional theory of communication failure, we examine two crises involving India during the 1960s: the 1962 Sino-Indian War⁷⁹ and the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War.⁸⁰ While our case analysis does not attempt to provide a complete account of the factors that contributed to either conflict, it does shed light on critical decision-making junctures during both conflicts.⁸¹ Specifically, the evidence identifies how noisy signaling contributed to a missed chance for peace during the road to war with China, and how clear communication contributed to ending the war with Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY FOR TRACING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

Existing empirical studies typically rely on behavioral indicators of how signals shape beliefs.⁸² This approach requires strong assumptions about states' abilities to reliably exchange information and about the ways that receivers update their beliefs on the basis of these communications.⁸³ States often

79. On the 1962 Sino-Indian War, see: Steven A. Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 174–197; Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), chaps. 7–8; Oriana Skylar Mastro, *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), chaps. 3–4.

80. On the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, see: Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), chap. 2; Farooq Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent: The Indo-Pakistan War of 1965* (London: Hurst, 2013), chaps. 3–4; Christopher Clary, *The Difficult Politics of Peace: Rivalry in Modern South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), chap. 5; Arzan Tarapore, “Defence Without Deterrence: India’s Strategy in the 1965 War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (October 2023), pp. 150–179, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1668274>.

81. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, pp. 83–84.

82. For example, see: Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs.”

83. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*.

change their behavior—seemingly complying with a coercive demand, for example—for reasons unrelated to communication.⁸⁴

To address these concerns, we turn to process-tracing. In general, process-tracing refers to the use of historical records “to identify the intervening causal process” between independent and dependent variables.⁸⁵ We apply this method to international signaling to illustrate how meaning changes or stays the same as it travels along the four steps in the communication channel illustrated in figure 1. Our approach examines communications as they pass from a leader in one state, through the domestic bureaucracy, to a leader in another state.

Our explanatory variable is the level of structural openness within the sending state’s bureaucratic system. We examine three institutional characteristics associated with information flows: whether the state possesses a dedicated advisory body to facilitate contact between leaders and the foreign policy bureaucracy; whether that body includes appointed representatives from both the diplomatic and defense ministries, as well as staff to perform coordinating functions; and whether the body is routinely used.⁸⁶

Our argument has testable implications for our intervening and dependent variables. First, our theory expects that shifting from closed to open institutional structures will produce lower levels of transmission noise (intervening variable). We measure transmission noise by tracing the signal transmission process: What message did the leader intend to send?⁸⁷ How well did bureaucrats understand the leader’s guidance? Did the message that bureaucrats sent inadvertently or intentionally differ from the leader’s intent? In open structures, the theory expects that transmission noise should be low: Leaders and bureaucrats within the transmitting state should send the messages that leaders intend. When message inconsistencies occur, they should be deliberate and coordinated by the leader and their bureaucracies. In closed structures, the the-

84. Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On how military postures shape coercion, see Fiona S. Cunningham, “Strategic Substitution: China’s Search for Coercive Leverage in the Information Age,” *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Summer 2022), pp. 46–92, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00438.

85. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, p. 206.

86. Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, pp. 55–57.

87. Identifying a leader’s preferred signal or intended meaning can be empirically challenging. Evidence directly suggesting the leader’s preferred signal includes: a leader’s private discussions or writings (e.g., a diary) at the time; a leader’s verbal or written guidance; and a leader’s recollections. A leader’s own signals may also suggest their preferred signals, although some leaders may strategically use contradictory signals.

ory expects that transmission noise should be high: Bureaucrats are likely to transmit messages that are substantively inconsistent with either the leader's own messages or other bureaucrats' messages—and inconsistencies should not reflect the leader's deliberate strategy.

The second testable implication is that the level of transmission noise will shape mutual understanding between the sender and the receiver (dependent variable), whereby the receiver understands the meaning of the message that the sender intended to transmit. To measure communication failure, we examine if the signal that Leader A intended to transmit is the same as the one that Leader B received. When Leader A sits atop a state with open institutions, our theory suggests that Leader B is more likely to accurately understand what Leader A is trying to tell them. When Leader A sits atop a state with closed institutions, our theory instead expects that Leader B is more likely to misunderstand the message that Leader A intended.

CASE SELECTION

We select two cases that leverage within-country variation in India's bureaucratic structure before and after institutional reforms in the mid-1960s.⁸⁸ As summarized in table 2, India transitioned from a closed to an open institutional structure during our study period. We compare India's transmission noise and its effects on mutual understanding during two conflicts that occurred immediately before and after India's reforms. The first case considers communications between India and China leading up to diplomatic talks in Geneva in 1962, when India possessed a closed structure. The second case considers communications between India and Pakistan before the 1966 Tashkent summit, which took place after India shifted to a comparatively open structure.

These cases offer several inferential advantages. First, they hold constant several situational and sender-level characteristics that might shape mutual understanding alongside bureaucratic structure. The most salient dimension of the international environment—a bipolar system divided along Cold War lines—remained unchanged during the two crises. The Soviet Union and the United States preferred a peaceful settlement and China and Pakistan provided a modicum of support to each other in both conflicts. Moreover, India's

88. Pattadakal Venkanna Raghavendra Rao, *India's Defence Policy and Organisation Since Independence* (New Delhi: United Service Institution of India, 1977); C. S. Jha, *From Bandung to Tashkent: Glimpses of India's Foreign Policy* (London: Sangam Books, 1983); Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *The Making of India's Foreign Policy: Determinants, Institutions, Processes, and Personalities*, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Allied, 2003).

Table 2. Overview of Case Studies

Case	Sender's bureaucratic institutions	Transmission noise	Mutual understanding
India-China communications (1962)	<p>CLOSED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • infrequent use of advisory bodies and committees • Nehru appointed himself as foreign minister • limited staff support • ad hoc policymaking 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unclear leader guidance during Geneva conference • Indian delegation failed to sign joint communiqué. 	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese decision-makers inaccurately understood Nehru's intended meaning.
India-Pakistan communications (1965)	<p>OPEN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • routine use of Emergency Committee of the Cabinet • appointed foreign minister and defense minister • staff support • standardized policymaking 	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear leader guidance before and during Tashkent summit • Indian bureaucracy broadcast Shastri's messages. 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistani decision-makers accurately understood Shastri's intended meaning.

broader set of political institutions did not shift between the two episodes. In both cases, democratically elected prime ministers were accountable to the public for their foreign policy choices, meaning that regime type alone cannot explain variation in communication success.

Second, these crises present a hard test for the theory's predictions regarding transmission noise.⁸⁹ As we highlight in the section on alternative explanations, China's institutions were designed in ways that existing theories suggest would have primed them for successful communication in 1962. In contrast, Pakistan's institutions in 1965 were designed in ways that scholarship suggests primed them for failure.⁹⁰

Third, in each case, there is a well-preserved set of records on both sides of the crisis. In the India-China case, we rely on the personal papers of Jawaharlal Nehru, records from the Chinese Communist Party archives, and memoirs of Indian and Chinese officials who participated in the Geneva negotiations. In the India-Pakistan case, we rely on the papers of Lal Bahadur Shastri, declassified records from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the United

89. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, pp. 120–123.

90. Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, pp. 86–99, 232–236.

Nations (UN), and firsthand accounts of elite decision-making from participants in New Delhi and Islamabad. We supplement these documents with archival records from the Soviet Union, the UK, and the United States.⁹¹ Tables 3a and 3b summarize our primary source collection.⁹²

India-China Communication, 1962

In the early 1960s, India's institutions were comparatively closed; they lacked routinized connections between the leader and the bureaucracy, particularly the defense ministry. First, policy planning bodies limited contact between different government entities. Diplomatic and defense decision-making was segregated into two separate bodies: the cabinet's foreign affairs committee, which shut out the military service chiefs; and the cabinet's defense committee, which excluded senior diplomats.⁹³ Both committees lacked secretarial support, beyond an intentionally small "military wing" of the cabinet that did not participate in foreign policy decision-making.

Second, coordination between these two bodies was limited. Nehru did not appoint a dedicated foreign minister, retaining the ministry's portfolio for himself. Thus, Nehru maintained unusually high access to the foreign ministry but comparatively less access to the defense ministry. As a result, the Indian defense establishment routinely complained of incomplete and unclear guidance from the prime minister. Nehru's instructions were typically relayed in a "rambling manner" that confused subordinates.⁹⁴

Third, the prime minister did not routinely use India's advisory bodies, particularly for considering India's strategy toward China. Nehru intentionally excluded the cabinet's defense committee from decision-making on India's border disputes; that body focused only on administrative and budgetary matters. Other forums for information-sharing across the diplomatic, de-

91. To improve the transparency and replicability of our qualitative analysis, we provide excerpts from key primary sources referenced in section 2 of the online appendix. This approach draws from the Annotation for Transparent Inquiry protocol. See Diana Kapiszewski and Sebastian Karcher, "Empowering Transparency: Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI)," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2021), pp. 473–478, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000287>.

92. Additional details regarding our document collection procedure are provided in section 1 of the online appendix.

93. Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, pp. 184–189.

94. D. K. Palit, *War in High Himalaya: The Indian Army in Crisis, 1962* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 106.

Table 3a. Sources for India-China Communications, 1962

Actor	Document type	Archive/source
Leader A (Nehru)	Correspondence	<i>Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru (SWJN)</i> ^a
Bureaucracy A (India)	Cables	Ministry of External Affairs Archives ^b
	Interview of defense minister	Michael Brecher ^c
	Memoir	P. K. Banerjee (chargé d'affaires) ^d
	Memoir	Arthur Lall (diplomat at Geneva conference) ^e
Bureaucracy B (China)	Cables	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives
	Meetings and correspondence	<i>Zhou Enlai nianpu</i> [Chronicle of Zhou Enlai] ^f
	Interview of Chinese premier	Neville Maxwell ^g
	Meetings of the foreign minister	<i>Chen Yi nianpu</i> [Chronicle of Chen Yi] ^h
	Meetings of the PRC chargé d'affaires in New Delhi	Archives of the Russian Federation ⁱ
Leader B (Mao)	Meetings and correspondence	<i>Mao Zedong nianpu</i> [Chronicle of Mao Zedong] ^j

SOURCES: (a) Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru [SWJN]*, Second Series, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal, Vols. 77–78. (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 2018); (b) Avtar Singh Bhasin, ed., *India-China Relations 1947–2000: A Documentary Study*, Vol. 4 (New Delhi: Geetika, 2018); (c) Michael Brecher, *India and World Politics: Krishna Menon's View of the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); (d) Purnendu Kumar Banerjee, *My Peking Memoirs of the Chinese Invasion of India* (New York: Clarion Books, 1990); (e) Arthur Lall, *The Emergence of Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); (f) Li Ping and Ma Zhisun, eds., *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976* [Chronicle of Zhou Enlai, 1949–1976], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997); Neville Maxwell, “The Afterthoughts of Premier Chou,” *Sunday Times* (London), December 19, 1971; (g) Liu Shufa, ed., *Chen Yi nianpu* [Chronicle of Chen Yi], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995); (h) Shen Zhihua, ed., *Eluosi jiemi dang'an xuanbian: ZhongSu guanxi* [Selection of declassified Russian archival documents: Sino-Soviet relations], Vol. 9 (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2015); (i) Pang Xianzhi and Feng Hui, eds., *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949–1976* [Chronicle of Mao Zedong, 1949–1976], Vol. 5 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2013).

fense, and intelligence bureaucracies, such as the Joint Intelligence Committee, were “moribund.”⁹⁵

In short, India's institutional structure provided few mechanisms for the prime minister and his bureaucratic agents to coordinate India's messaging toward China. This closed institutional structure prevented India from communicating effectively, paving the way to misunderstanding and ultimately war.

95. Rao, *India's Defence Policy and Organisation Since Independence*, p. 12.

Table 3b. Sources for India-Pakistan Communications, 1965

Actor	Document type	Archive/source
Leader A (Shastri)	Meeting records Memoir	L. B. Shastri Papers, J. Nehru Memorial Library Joint Secretary C. P. Srivastava ^a
Bureaucracy A (India)	Cables Diary Memoir	Ministry of External Affairs Archives ^b Defence Minister Y. B. Chavan ^c Foreign Secretary C. S. Jha ^d
Bureaucracy B (Pakistan)	Meeting records of the foreign secretary Memoir	National Archives (UK) Iqbal Akhund (diplomat at Tashkent summit) ^e
Leader B (Ayub)	Meetings and correspondence Memoir	National Archives (UK); <i>Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968</i> ^f Altaf Gauhar (Pakistani civil servant in Ayub Khan administration) ^g

SOURCES: (a) C. P. Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri: A Life of Truth in Politics* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1998); (b) Avtar Singh Bhasin, ed., *India-Pakistan Relations 1947–2007: A Documentary Study*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Geetika, 2012); (c) R. D. Pradhan, *1965 War, The Inside Story: Defence Minister Y. B. Chavan's Diary of India-Pakistan War* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2007); (d) Jha, *From Bandung to Tashkent*; (e) Iqbal Akhund, *Memoirs of a By-stander: A Life in Diplomacy* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997); (f) *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964–1968*, Vol. 25, *South Asia*, ed. Gabrielle S. Mallon and Louis J. Smith (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000); (g) Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

INDIA'S HIGH TRANSMISSION NOISE

In the summer of 1962, relations between India and China deteriorated in the wake of escalating tensions over unresolved border disputes. After failed negotiations in April 1960, both India and China attempted to improve their military control over contested territory. As Indian and Chinese military forces closed in on each other, military confrontations occurred in the Chip Chap and Galwan Valleys in May and July 1962, respectively.⁹⁶

From June to August 1962, however, Nehru attempted to shift India's bargaining position to reach a diplomatic settlement.⁹⁷ Nehru's position consisted of two key points. First, Nehru was open to negotiations. Nehru had long harbored the desire to reach a negotiated compromise with China on the border

96. For an overview, see Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, pp. 286–287.

97. Ibid., pp. 287–292. See also Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p. 108; Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 3, 1956–1964 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 213–214.

issue, and he reaffirmed his interest publicly.⁹⁸ On June 20, Nehru reiterated his position to the Indian parliament, stating that both countries were amenable to a settlement that “would not involve too considerable a loss of face” to China.⁹⁹ Second, Nehru’s position was flexible regarding the conditions for talks. During a press conference on June 13, for instance, Nehru indicated that military withdrawal from the border—heretofore Delhi’s prerequisite for restarting talks with Beijing—was merely a suggestion, implying that Nehru was open to negotiations without demanding an immediate Chinese withdrawal.¹⁰⁰ During a meeting with the Chinese ambassador the same day, Nehru similarly proposed that both sides consider possibilities to settle the war without requiring China to withdraw from the border.¹⁰¹

Closed institutions, however, dramatically increased India’s transmission noise, setting conditions for communication failure between India and China. First, closed institutions prevented Indian officials from establishing a common and consistent signaling strategy toward China. Of the numerous diplomatic notes that the Ministry of External Affairs delivered to the Chinese embassy in India in June, the same month as Nehru’s press conference and statements in parliament, not one reiterated Nehru’s interests in talks.¹⁰² While the Ministry of External Affairs secretary general and the defense minister expressed interest in diplomatic talks to the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi,¹⁰³ they reportedly did so without clear guidance from Nehru.¹⁰⁴ These messages from the secretary general and the defense minister, which likely reflected Nehru’s position only inadvertently, were drowned out by a flurry of diplomatic messages. From July 1 to July 23, the Indian Ministry of External

98. On Jawaharlal Nehru’s evolving position, see Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, pp. 242–249, 255–257, 261–267.

99. In the Rajya Sabha, Chinese Incursions in the North, June 20, 1962, in Nehru, *SWJN*, Second Series, Vol. 77, doc. 396, p. 646.

100. “Premier See Indications of Chinese Desire to Settle Dispute,” *The Times of India*, June 13, 1962, p. 1.

101. Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, pp. 287–288.

102. See notes and aide memoirs given by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to the Embassy of China in India on June 6, 1962 (doc. 1755, pp. 3705–3706), June 6, 1962 (doc. 1756, pp. 3707–3708), June 8, 1962 (doc. 1759, p. 3717), June 20, 1962 (doc. 1761, pp. 3719–3721), June 22, 1962 (doc. 1762, pp. 3722–3725), June 28, 1962 (doc. 1763, p. 3726), June 28, 1962 (doc. 1764, p. 3727), June 30, 1962 (doc. 1765, pp. 3728–3731), June 30, 1962 (doc. 1766, pp. 3762–3763). Available in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*, Vol. 4.

103. Yu La. Ku. Nihelu tan ZhongYin guanxi wenti [Discussion of Sino-Indian relations with R. K. Nehru], July 5, 1962, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (henceforth PRC MFA Archives), file 105-01807-01.

104. Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Indian Border Dispute,” April 17, 1987, pp. 37–38, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp91b00874r000300190005-5>.

Affairs delivered multiple additional notes, none of which suggested that Nehru was open to talks.¹⁰⁵ In parallel, some Indian officials also doubted the orders that they received. The Indian ambassador in Beijing, for instance, questioned whether the proper authorities in Delhi had approved instructions to approach Beijing about talks.¹⁰⁶ Thus, even after Nehru communicated directly with the Chinese ambassador to clarify India's interest in talks with China,¹⁰⁷ officials in Beijing remained unsure of what the prime minister's position actually was.¹⁰⁸

Second, closed institutions impeded coordination between Indian officials charged with diplomatic negotiations in Geneva and those executing military operations on the border. Nehru consistently struggled to gain accurate information on how the Indian military was implementing maneuvers along the border, limiting his ability to control the timing of border actions.¹⁰⁹

Third, closed institutions caused informal talks between key Indian and Chinese officials to break down at the Geneva conference in late July 1962. Before the conference, Nehru noted that both Defence Minister V. K. Krishna Menon and Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi would be present, which provided a fortuitous opportunity to meet on the sidelines without attracting public attention.¹¹⁰ While Nehru encouraged Menon to use the opportunity to begin talks, there appears to have been little coordination between the prime minister and the Indian delegation before the Geneva conference.¹¹¹ Thus, when Menon, accompanied by Indian diplomat Arthur Lall, met with Chen and senior PRC diplomats Zhang Hanfu and Qiao Guanhua on July 22 and 23, Menon proposed his own position and failed to clarify whether future negotiations could begin without conditions.¹¹²

105. See notes given by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to the Embassy of China in India on July 6, 1962 (doc. 1768, pp. 3737–3739), July 11, 1962 (doc. 1770, pp. 3743–3749), July 12, 1962 (doc. 1772, pp. 3750–3751), July 14, 1962 (doc. 1774, pp. 3755–3758), and July 17, 1962 (doc. 1776, pp. 3760–3763). Available in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*, Vol. 4.

106. Banerjee, *My Peking Memoirs*, pp. 51–52.

107. In the Lok Sabha: India-China Border II, August 4, 1962, in Nehru, *SWJN*, Second Series, Vol. 78, doc. 405, p. 619.

108. Qing chengqing Pan dashi yu Nihelu de tanhua [Requesting clarification on Ambassador Pan's conversation with Nehru], July 15, 1962, PRC MFA Archives, file 105-01807-01.

109. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, pp. 208–209.

110. Nehru to Menon, July 16, 1962, in Nehru, *SWJN*, Second Series, Vol. 77, doc. 403, pp. 661–662.

111. For Nehru's public recounting of his guidance to Menon, see In the Lok Sabha: India-China Border II, in Nehru, *SWJN*, Second Series, Vol. 78, doc. 405, p. 619.

112. Lall, *The Emergence of Modern India*, p. 155. See also interview with Krishna Menon in Brecher,

Most importantly, when the Chinese delegation proposed a joint communiqué to affirm that India viewed the discussions as “constructive and fruitful” and that India intended to pursue “further talks in the near future,” Menon and Lall lacked instructions on how to respond to this “welcomed” idea.¹¹³ Menon cabled Nehru, who had stayed in India, for guidance. Menon received the prime minister’s approval of the joint communiqué only after the Chinese delegation had departed Geneva. As a result, even though Nehru was in favor, India never agreed to sign the communiqué and China walked away empty-handed. As Lall later recalled, the “constructive proposal” for talks staving off further conflict was “left hanging in the air.”¹¹⁴

EFFECT ON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND THE ROAD TO WAR

India’s noisy signaling led Chinese decision-makers to inaccurately conclude that Nehru was not interested in peace talks. First, Chinese decision-makers mistakenly believed that the Indian diplomatic position at the Geneva conference was a sign that Nehru was unwilling to negotiate. Before the conference, Chinese diplomats in both New Delhi and Beijing saw an opportunity to negotiate with India.¹¹⁵ After reporting to Mao, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai instructed Foreign Minister Chen on July 23 to seize the opportunity at Geneva to settle arrangements for a new round of talks.¹¹⁶ But Chinese assessments changed after the Geneva meetings.¹¹⁷ Zhou concluded, apparently in part because of the unsigned communiqué, that Nehru was unwilling to talk to China: “What should we do! We tried several times, but [talking] did not work.”¹¹⁸ Days after the talks ended, China’s chargé d’affaires in New Delhi

India and World Politics, p. 170; Liu, *Chen Yi nianpu*, Vol. 2, p. 926; Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Indian Border Dispute,” pp. 38–39.

113. Lall, *The Emergence of Modern India*, p. 156.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

115. Yin bao ping Nihelu 6 yue 13 ri de jianghua [Indian newspapers comment on Nehru’s June 13th speech], July 2, 1962, PRC MFA Archives, file 105-01638-01; Waijiao bu shoudian [Ministry of Foreign Affairs inbound cable], July 16, 1962, PRC MFA Archives, file 105-01807-01.

116. Li and Ma, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol. 2, p. 490. See also Pang and Feng, *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol. 5, p. 117. On Mao’s preference for restraint in July 1962, see Jiang Siyi and Li Hui, eds., *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi* [An operational history of the China-India border counterattack in self-defense] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 1994), p. 142.

117. Xu Yan, *ZhongYin bianjie zhizhan lishi zhenxiang* [The true history of the Sino-Indian Border War] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1993), p. 91.

118. Guanyu ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zhan de shige wenti [Ten questions on the Sino-Indian border counterattack in self-defense], November 24, 1962, in Liu Wusheng, ed., *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* [Zhou Enlai’s selected works on military affairs] (Beijing Renmin chubanshe, 1997),

commented that both the embassy and the foreign ministry “originally thought that tensions between China and India would quickly subside,” but now he believed that strained relations would persist for “a comparatively long time.”¹¹⁹ Nehru’s subsequent public denial that Menon had negotiated with the Chinese delegation¹²⁰ bolstered China’s new assessments.¹²¹ While Nehru did not intend for the comments to signal a lack of commitment to continuing peace talks, Chinese decision-makers interpreted his remarks as repudiating the prospects of future peace talks.¹²²

Second, Chinese decision-makers interpreted India’s noisy signals as confirming their fears of Indian insincerity. On July 26, immediately after the Geneva talks, the Indian foreign ministry delivered a new note to the Chinese ambassador affirming India’s willingness to enter discussions “as soon as the current tensions have eased and the appropriate climate is created.”¹²³ But Chinese officials were unaware of the communication breakdown between Nehru and Menon during the conference, and India’s renewed entreaty thus appeared insincere.¹²⁴ Zhou expressed his strong dissatisfaction with Nehru’s position to the Indian ambassador in Beijing.¹²⁵ Fearing that India was stalling to improve its military position, the Chinese foreign ministry delivered a “disappointing” reply on August 4.¹²⁶ For Chinese officials, India’s military actions also appeared to undermine the message that India was trying to convey in its

p. 471. In an interview, Zhou later emphasized the importance of the unsigned communiqué at Geneva, noting that although Menon had suggested during the Geneva talks that India only needed more time to sign the document, “nothing came of it” after the Indian delegation departed. See Maxwell, “The Afterthoughts of Premier Chou.”

119. Yu Zhongguo zhu Yindu linshi daiban Ye Chengzhang de huitan jilu [Record of talks with Chinese Chargé d’Affairs in India Ye Chengzhang], July 26, 1962, in Shen, *Eluosi jiemì dang’an xuanbian*, Vol. 9, pp. 384–385.

120. In the Lok Sabha: India-China Border II, in Nehru, *SWJN*, Second Series, Vol. 78, doc. 405, p. 619.

121. Yindu zhengfu zai bianjie tanpan wenti shang de dongxiang [Trends in the Indian government stance on border negotiations], August 28, 1962, PRC MFA Archives, file 105-01638-01.

122. Lall, *The Emergence of Modern India*, p. 157.

123. Note Given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, July 26, 1962, in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*, Vol. 4, doc. 1783, pp. 3775–3776. Diplomatic communication during and immediately after the Geneva talks had not suggested India’s openness to negotiations. See Indian Ministry of External Affairs notes from July 22, 1962 (doc. 1778, p. 3765), July 23, 1962 (doc. 1780, pp. 3767–3770), July 24, 1962 (doc. 1781, pp. 3771–3772), and July 25, 1962 (doc. 1782, pp. 3773–3774). Available in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*, Vol. 4.

124. Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, pp. 288–289.

125. Banerjee, *My Peking Memoirs*, pp. 53–54.

126. On China’s reply, see: Note Given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy

diplomatic notes. For example, Indian troops attacked Chinese positions the day before talks in Geneva began¹²⁷ and fired on Chinese forces days after the talks ended.¹²⁸ As the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi noted, “On the one hand, the Indian side expresses willingness to negotiate, but on the other hand it tries to find holes in the western sector, press on our borders, set up numerous outposts, occupy territory, and create a fait accompli in order to bargain.”¹²⁹

Communication failures likely contributed to China’s escalation to war in the fall of 1962. After China rejected India’s July 26 entreaty, Nehru faced stiff domestic criticism and abandoned the more flexible position that he had taken since June. On August 13, the prime minister told parliament that there would be no further border talks. As historian Srinath Raghavan notes, “The gridlock was complete.”¹³⁰ By mid-September, both Mao and Foreign Minister Chen assessed that a struggle with India was “inevitable.”¹³¹ The Politburo Standing Committee convened to discuss strategy toward India on September 17 and 21 and on October 2,¹³² and the Central Military Commission issued war orders in early October.¹³³ It is plausible that clearer communication from India might have led to a different outcome. Drawing attention to the delayed communication between Nehru and Menon at Geneva, Arthur Lall, the Indian official present during the talks, later noted that “another round of discussions” might well have “averted” the Sino-Indian War.¹³⁴

of India in China, August 4, 1962, in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*, Vol. 4, doc. 1791, pp. 3784–3785; Jiang and Li, *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi*, pp. 469–470. On Nehru’s dis-
appointment, see In the Lok Sabha: Ladakh Situation, August 6, 1962, in Nehru, *SWJN*, Second Se-
ries, Vol. 78, doc. 401, pp. 599–601.

127. Note Given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, Au-
gust 1, 1962, in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*, Vol. 4, doc. 1788, pp. 3781–3782.

128. PRC MFA to Indian Embassy, August 4, 1962, in Bhasin, *India-China Relations 1947–2000*,
Vol. 4, doc. 1791, pp. 3784–3785.

129. Waijiaobu shou dian [Ministry of Foreign Affairs inbound cable], July 16, 1962, PRC MFA
Archives, file 105-01807-01.

130. Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, p. 291.

131. Zai ZhongGong ba jie shi zhong quanhui huadongzu qingkuang jianbao shang de piyu
[Comment on the brief by the East Group of the 10th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Commit-
tee], September 1962, Central Committee Archives Research Office, ed., *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong
wengao* [Manuscripts of Mao Zedong since the founding of the state], Vol. 10 (Beijing: Zhongyang
wenxian chubanshe, 1996), pp. 188–189.

132. *Mao Zedong nianpu*, Vol. 5, pp. 148, 149, 162.

133. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 192–193.

134. Lall, *The Emergence of Modern India*, p. 158.

India-Pakistan Communications, 1965

During the mid-1960s, India reformed its institutions for managing foreign and defense affairs. Inadequate decision-making during the 1962 Sino-Indian War spurred these reforms in large part. First, Nehru integrated the defense and foreign affairs committees into a new body for policy planning: the Emergency Committee of the Cabinet (ECC). The open structure provided a regular venue for the Indian prime minister and the foreign policy bureaucracy to convene.¹³⁵ Nehru's successor, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri also "strengthened" and "institutionalized" the Prime Minister's Secretariat and Committee of Secretaries during his term to keep an "octopus-grip over foreign-security policy making."¹³⁶

Second, despite its name, the ECC met routinely in peacetime and became the primary forum for information on routine foreign policy matters, as well as politico-military strategy under crisis conditions until the 1970s.¹³⁷ Indian leaders also used other mechanisms for information-sharing within the government, such as the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Defence Minister's Committee.

Third, unlike Nehru, who kept the portfolio of the foreign minister for himself, Shastri appointed Swaran Singh to be the foreign minister. The open structure afforded Singh, as well as Defence Minister Y. B. Chavan and the military leadership, routine access to Shastri. As the Indian Ministry of Defence noted in a subsequent review, "There was complete understanding and trust" between the civilian government and the military in 1965.¹³⁸

In short, institutional reforms established a comparatively open institutional structure by the mid-1960s that enabled India to maintain a low level of transmission noise, paving the way to a successful peace conference.

INDIA'S LOW TRANSMISSION NOISE

In August 1965, Pakistan launched a combined guerrilla campaign and conventional offensive against India to pressure Delhi to concede territory in the

135. Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, pp. 190–192; Rao, *India's Defence Policy*, pp. 11–12.

136. Pramoda Kumar Panda, *Making of India's Foreign Policy: Prime Ministers and Wars* (New Delhi: Raj, 2003), p. 39. See also Bandyopadhyaya, *The Making of India's Foreign Policy*, p. 135.

137. Bandyopadhyaya, *The Making of India's Foreign Policy*, pp. 139–140; Jha, *From Bandung to Tashkent*, pp. 209–210, 301–303.

138. B. C. Chakravorty, *Official History of the Indo-Pak War, 1965*, ed. S. N. Prasad et al. (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992), p. xxii.

disputed region of Kashmir.¹³⁹ India's successful counterattack, coupled with international pressure from the superpowers and the UN, led to an uneasy truce in late September and an offer from Moscow to mediate the conflict. UN Resolution 211 halted the fighting,¹⁴⁰ yet it left thousands of heavily armed troops facing off across the ceasefire line, as each side had gained and lost significant chunks of territory along its shared border.¹⁴¹ India's institutional reforms yielded a markedly lower level of transmission noise in 1965 than in 1962. India's low-noise messaging in 1965 set conditions for mutual understanding and diplomatic talks at Tashkent.

Prime Minister Shastri's position toward Pakistan consisted of two key points. First, Shastri was open to negotiations and willing to withdraw Indian troops from the territory over which they had gained control during the fighting. In a December 3 letter to Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, Shastri affirmed that he was not putting any conditions on the talks.¹⁴² In late December, Shastri asserted that peace was possible "if Pakistan made sincere and honest attempts at Tashkent to settle the problem."¹⁴³ In internal meetings with the party leadership, Shastri stated that he was "ready to discuss and settle the matters with a peaceful approach" and would also "listen to" the Pakistani side to uncover "some solution to these ticklish problems."¹⁴⁴ With-

139. Regarding India's failed deterrence in the 1965 war, see: Sumit Ganguly, "Deterrence Failure Revisited: The Indo-Pakistani War of 1965," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1990), pp. 81–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399008437432>; Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent*, chaps. 3–4; Clary, *The Difficult Politics of Peace*, chap. 6.

140. For the text of the UN resolution, see Resolution 211 (1965), September 20, 1965, [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/211\(1965\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/211(1965)).

141. If India had transmitted noisy signals to Pakistan before the war's onset, this finding might refute our theory. Yet the historical record contains scant evidence of Indian transmission noise. Instead, past scholarship emphasizes Pakistani miscalculations rather than India's signaling to explain the origins of the war. The historical record suggests that an influential subset of Ayub Khan's advisers—the "Kashmir hawks"—convinced the president that a quick and easy victory over India was possible. That inference stemmed from information processing errors, flawed comparisons between Pakistan's past military performance and a future Kashmir campaign, and Ayub's biased personal impressions of Lal Bahadur Shastri. In addition to sources in note 139, see: Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri*, chaps. 13–14; Akhund, *Memoirs of a Bystander*, chap. 6; Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State, New Delhi, May 10, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 25, doc. 119; Lachhman Singh Lehl, *Missed Opportunities Indo-Pak War 1965* (Dehradun, India: Natraj, 1997), pp. 118–119.

142. Shastri to Kosygin, December 3, 1965, in Bhasin, *India-Pakistan Relations 1947–2007*, Vol. 2, doc. 2237, pp. 5242–5243.

143. Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri*, p. 333.

144. Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Congress Party, January 1, 1966, file 7, Papers of L. B. Shastri, J. Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi.

drawing Indian forces from territory taken during the war, such as the Haji Pir Pass, was possible if Pakistan made corresponding commitments to withdraw and to limit border infiltration.

Second, Shastri was adamant that Kashmir would not be on the agenda for any negotiations with Pakistan, consistent with India's long-standing position on this issue. Shastri rejected Pakistan's initial terms for a ceasefire, which included withdrawing Indian forces from the disputed province.¹⁴⁵ After accepting UN Secretary General U Thant's ceasefire proposal on September 20, the Indian prime minister began "availing of every opportunity and every forum of importance to reiterate India's determination . . . that in any future negotiations between India and Pakistan, India's sovereignty over Kashmir would not be negotiable."¹⁴⁶ As Shastri declared in mid-October, there was "no question of concessions over underlying political causes if these meant Kashmir."¹⁴⁷ In mid-November, Shastri pledged to meet with Pakistan's leadership and "discuss anything but Kashmir."¹⁴⁸

In contrast to 1962, India's bureaucracy consistently communicated both components of Shastri's stance through a variety of channels. Indian President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan told U.S. Ambassador to India Chester Bowles that "he did not think that it was possible to agree to the Kashmir adjustments that Pakistan has in mind."¹⁴⁹ L. K. Jha, Shastri's principal secretary, subsequently reiterated to Bowles that India "wants nothing" from Pakistan and was willing "in principle" to participate in direct negotiations at Tashkent.¹⁵⁰ British officials understood that India's terms for negotiations "would mean in effect an acceptance by Pakistan that . . . they will be giving up their claim for a settlement of the Kashmir problem."¹⁵¹ As S. K. Patel, the Indian high commissioner to the UK, told Prime Minister Harold Wilson, although Pakistan "was

145. September 12, 1965, Chavan Diary, in Pradhan, *1965 War, the Inside Story*, p. 91.

146. Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri*, pp. 320–321.

147. Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent*, p. 321.

148. Deva Sharma, *Tashkent: The Fight for Peace* (Varanasi, India: Gandhian Institute of Studies, 1966), p. 146.

149. Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State, New Delhi, September 11, 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 201.

150. Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State, New Delhi, September 21, 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 221.

151. Brief prepared by the British Commonwealth Relations Office for the Secretary of State for the Cabinet meeting on Kashmir, September 12, 1965, in Bhasin, *India-Pakistan Relations 1947–2007*, Vol. 2, doc. 2202, pp. 5157–5159.

in fact trying to convert a military defeat into a political success . . . it was essential that Pakistan should be convinced that India wanted peaceful relations.”¹⁵² According to the UK Foreign Office, multiple Indian officials expressed “without exception” that they accepted the need to “live with Pakistan.”¹⁵³ In late December, multiple Indian officials issued statements noting that their approach to Tashkent would be “flexible.”¹⁵⁴

Open institutions played a critical role in reducing transmission noise. First, unlike during the summer of 1962, in 1965 India’s coordination bodies facilitated frequent contact among foreign policy bureaucrats. The ECC met almost daily to chart India’s diplomatic strategy, including regular deliberations regarding whether and when to accept the UN ceasefire agreement.¹⁵⁵ Second, compared with Nehru’s poor coordination before the 1962 Geneva meetings, a more open institutional design facilitated Shastri’s “wide-ranging consultations” with other senior officials about the forthcoming summit and encouraged including in the delegation perspectives from the defense, foreign, and home ministries, as well as the army.¹⁵⁶ As a result, the Indian delegation “arrived in Tashkent with the draft text of a comprehensive declaration based on India’s own ideas,” accepted feedback from Soviet officials via India’s ambassador to Moscow, and produced “a complete agreement . . . drafted by C. S. Jha and revised in some important respects by Shastri himself. This draft contained texts on the question of Kashmir . . . which conformed to Shastri’s views.”¹⁵⁷ Third, Shastri and Chavan maintained tight control over military actions.¹⁵⁸ Following persistent ceasefire violations, the Indian Chief of Army Staff ordered a “unilateral cessation of firing by all formations” on December 26.¹⁵⁹ Third-party observers noted that there was “a considerable decline in the number of incidents” along the ceasefire line as the summit approached.¹⁶⁰

152. Record of a Conversation, November 5, 1965, DO 133/180, National Archives, London, UK (UKNA).

153. Meetings with Various Indian Ministers, November 12, 1965, DO 133/181, UKNA.

154. Indo-Pakistan Relations, January 8, 1966, DO 133/181, UKNA.

155. September 12, 13, 15, 17, 20–22, 1965, Chavan Diary, in Pradhan, *1965 War, the Inside Story*, pp. 49, 57–58, 65, 77–78, 81–84.

156. Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri*, p. 332.

157. *Ibid.*, p. 383.

158. Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent*, p. 388.

159. New York to Foreign Office, January 4, 1966, DO 133/181, UKNA.

160. Rawalpindi to CRO, January 11, 1966, DO 133/181, UKNA.

EFFECT ON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND THE PATH TO PEACE

The low transmission noise from India's communications shaped Pakistani President Ayub Khan's understanding of India's position. First, Ayub accurately concluded from India's signals that serious discussion of Kashmir at Tashkent was unlikely. Ayub grasped from India's "numerous pronouncements" that its leadership was "determined to maintain its position that India's sovereignty over Kashmir was simply not negotiable."¹⁶¹ At a December 31 cabinet meeting, Ayub said that "[in] his judgment" the Indian leadership "would not yield on Kashmir." Ayub similarly told U.S. diplomats he believed that the Indians were "in no mood to be reasonable" on Kashmir.¹⁶²

Second, India's signals led Ayub to accurately assess that Shastri was willing to withdraw troops from the territory in Kashmir that had changed hands as a result of the fighting. Ayub initially believed, incorrectly, that Shastri was not interested in substantive talks and that diplomatic negotiations would not yield Indian withdrawals. In September, Ayub wrote to Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin that the proposed meeting at Tashkent "would not be productive."¹⁶³ Ayub commented that he "didn't think Indians . . . would actually withdraw" but rather "intended [to] stay in position in Kashmir."¹⁶⁴ If anything, Ayub suggested that his Indian counterparts were in a "reckless mood,"¹⁶⁵ while Foreign Secretary Aziz Ahmed feared that India was preparing for a "second round" of fighting rather than peaceful withdrawal.¹⁶⁶

By late December, however, Ayub's beliefs about the productivity of a diplomatic summit and the likelihood of an Indian troop withdrawal had changed. He expressed hope that the talks could yield progress on issues other than Kashmir. At the December 31 cabinet meeting, Ayub told his inner circle that he felt that India "might agree to the withdrawal of forces," which was Pakistan's top priority.¹⁶⁷ Ayub privately indicated that restoring normal relations with India and withdrawing troops along the border were necessary before there could be "real progress on Kashmir."¹⁶⁸

161. Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri*, p. 336.

162. Gauhar, *Ayub Khan*, p. 258.

163. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

164. Telegram from the Embassy Office in Pakistan to the Department of State, Rawalpindi, September 29, 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 226.

165. Rawalpindi to CRO, November 25, 1965, DO 133/181, UKNA.

166. Karachi to CRO, October 25, 1965, DO 133/180, UKNA.

167. Gauhar, *Ayub Khan*, p. 258.

168. Karachi to CRO, January 14, 1966, DO 133/181, UKNA.

Low levels of transmission noise helped Ayub revise his beliefs about the prospect of stable relations with India before the Tashkent summit—Ayub understood the message that Shastri was attempting to send. Delhi's diplomatic signals conveyed that "the Indians were not a war-like people: they were men of peace."¹⁶⁹ Indian Ambassador to Moscow T. N. Kaul emphasized how the summit could restore normal diplomatic and economic relations between India and Pakistan.¹⁷⁰ On the military front, Indian troops reduced violence along the ceasefire line, which addressed Ayub's core concern about the consistency between India's political and military actions.¹⁷¹ It was therefore significant when press photographs published on January 8 showed the Indian and Pakistani generals in charge of the tactical withdrawal negotiations "greeting each other" in an "extremely genial atmosphere."¹⁷² As British diplomats observed, "It is not possible to imagine such pictures appearing a month ago. This must be taken to indicate the willingness to ease relationships on the part of Indian authorities."¹⁷³ By the summit's conclusion, Ayub himself was telling his cabinet of "an opening for co-existence with India" because Shastri "realized [the] necessity of peace for both India and Pakistan."¹⁷⁴

Alternative Explanations for Mutual Understanding

Several alternative explanations for communication success and failure in our analysis are worth considering. First, consistent with the conventional wisdom, one might posit that communication failures stem from perceptions of sincerity rather than the level of transmission noise.¹⁷⁵ Yet in *both* cases, decision-makers in Beijing and Islamabad initially doubted India's sincerity. Mao, Zhou, and other Chinese leaders feared that India was duplicitous,¹⁷⁶ but

169. Record of Conversation, November 5, 1965, DO 133/180, UKNA.

170. Indo-Pakistan Relations, January 8, 1966, DO 133/181, UKNA.

171. Ayub noted in late September that "political and military must be side by side so both parties will know what is intended. After all, political and military aspects are combined and not separate watertight compartments." See Telegram from the Embassy Office in Pakistan to the Department of State, Rawalpindi, September 29, 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 226.

172. New Delhi to CRO, January 10, 1966, DO 133/181, UKNA.

173. Ibid.

174. Gauhar, *Ayub Khan*, p. 272; Telegram from the Embassy Office in Pakistan to the Department of State, Rawalpindi, January 19, 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 284.

175. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*.

176. See John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962," in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 86-130.

so did Ayub, who told U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Walter McConaughy on September 20, 1965, that the “Hindus” were up to their “usual clever trickery and self-righteousness.”¹⁷⁷ Ayub similarly told British interlocutors that he was “despondent about the Indians.”¹⁷⁸ Ayub went so far as to comment that “we are dealing with a diseased people and don’t know how much control exists at [the] highest level.”¹⁷⁹ Yet India was able to achieve mutual understanding *despite* Ayub’s skepticism. In 1962, in contrast, high transmission noise was a key source of elevated distrust. In the wake of inconsistent Indian messages, Zhou Enlai commented in August that Nehru had “lost control” of the government.¹⁸⁰

A second alternative explanation might attribute variation in communication success to receiver-side differences between China and Pakistan. As existing scholarship on misperception emphasizes, communication can fail because receivers do not effectively process the information that they receive from the international environment.¹⁸¹ Yet the institutional structures in Beijing and Islamabad actually set communication up for success in 1962 and for failure in 1965. China possessed comparatively open institutions during the summer of 1962, meaning that China was primed to effectively process India’s signals with minimal misperceptions.¹⁸² Conversely, Pakistan’s institutions were comparatively closed, which meant that Pakistan may have been primed for misperception in the fall of 1965.¹⁸³

A third alternative explanation would suggest that it was simply harder for India to reach a settlement with China than with Pakistan, in part because the 1962 Sino-Indian negotiations took place before the outbreak of war, whereas the 1965 Indo-Pakistani negotiations took place after a ceasefire was in place. Yet two points militate against attributing variation in communication success to this factor. First, as noted previously, border skirmishes between Indian and Pakistani forces persisted even after the UN resolution. In fact, in his public remarks accepting the resolution, Ayub used the Urdu

177. Telegram from the Embassy Office in Pakistan to the Department of State, Rawalpindi, September 20, 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 217.

178. Rawalpindi to CRO, November 25, 1965, DO 133/181, UKNA.

179. Telegram from the Embassy Office in Pakistan to the Department of State, Rawalpindi, September 29, 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Vol. 25, doc. 226.

180. Banerjee, *My Peking Memoirs*, pp. 53–54.

181. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*.

182. Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, pp. 86–99.

183. On this perspective, see: Ganguly, “Deterrence Failure Revisited,” pp. 81–87; Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, pp. 241–243.

phrase “fire-bandī” (hold fire), which suggested the possibility of renewed hostilities, as opposed to “jang-bandī” (ceasefire), which would have implied a definitive end to the war.¹⁸⁴ While Ayub’s wording was likely aimed at domestic audiences, his framing illustrates the fragility of the peace between India and Pakistan as the two countries looked to reach a more permanent settlement. Second, Ayub initially believed that negotiations with India were neither feasible nor likely to yield substantive progress. On September 23, Ayub told UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson that he saw no point in meeting Shastri face-to-face. Such a meeting would amount to a “propaganda stunt” during which “they would merely restate their views and no solution could be reached.”¹⁸⁵ In short, despite the ceasefire, there was ample room for communication failure in the months leading up to the Tashkent summit.

A fourth alternative explanation is that India increased its bureaucratic capacity to transmit more messages, rather than less noisy ones, when it shifted from closed to open structures from 1962 to 1965. While congruent with our theory emphasizing the central role of bureaucracy, this explanation would instead posit that improved understanding stemmed from a more capable and better resourced Indian bureaucracy, as opposed to better coordination and monitoring between the leader and the bureaucracy. Yet India did not significantly increase the capacity of its foreign affairs bureaucracy during this period. The Ministry of External Affairs was actually smaller in 1965 (2,285 personnel) than in 1962 (2,875 personnel).¹⁸⁶ In addition, India had diplomatic posts in both China and Pakistan in 1962 and 1965, respectively, and the ministry’s overseas posts abroad increased only modestly over this period, from 89 in 1962 to 96 in 1965.¹⁸⁷

A final alternative explanation might emphasize relative differences in the personality, prior executive experience, and political strength of Nehru and Shastri.¹⁸⁸ For instance, low transmission noise under Shastri might have

184. Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent*, p. 312.

185. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

186. Archived annual reports are available at “Annual Reports,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://mealib.nic.in/?2386?005>. We provide additional details in section 3 of the online appendix.

187. Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report 1963–64* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1964), pp. 7–8, <https://mealib.nic.in/?pdf2490?000>; *Annual Report 1964–65* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1964), pp. 100–101, <https://mealib.nic.in/?pdf2491?000>.

188. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*; Elizabeth N. Saunders, “No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making,” *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. S1 (April 2017), pp. S219–247, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831600045X>.

stemmed from a stronger political position or more time in office. If anything, however, the opposite is true. Whereas Nehru governed with wide latitude and had been prime minister for about fifteen years at the time of the Geneva negotiations in the summer of 1962, Shastri was a comparatively weak prime minister who had been in office for just over a year when the Indo-Pakistani War began in August 1965.¹⁸⁹ Some scholars also suggest that personality or prior experience shapes a leader's preferences for different decision-making procedures, meaning that the different level of transmission noise in 1962 versus 1965 could simply stem from leadership turnover.¹⁹⁰ Yet institutional change *preceded* Shastri's becoming prime minister. Nehru, not Shastri, established the key decision-making body on which Shastri relied (the ECC). Moreover, even if Shastri's personality shaped how he used the ECC, this is also consistent with our general approach: Leader-level qualities would have shaped noise levels through the types of institutions that leaders use.

Conclusion

This article has explored the sender-side origins of communication failure as state decision-makers choose between war and peace. While the existing literature emphasizes how sender sincerity and receiver misperception shape mutual understanding between states, it has underappreciated how senders' transmission noise influences communication. Drawing on insights from information theory and the logic of bureaucratic institutions, we have developed a theory of how transmission noise impedes mutual understanding. We explain how an important source of transmission noise is the division of labor within states, and how institutional structure moderates the extent to which divided labor hampers mutual understanding. Open structures reduce costs of information-sharing between leaders and their foreign policy bureaucracies, which in turn enables bureaucrats to transmit signals that more closely accord with the leader's intended meaning. All else equal, leaders sitting atop open structures communicate more effectively because their subordinates are more likely to faithfully implement their signaling orders. In short, institu-

189. Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New York: Ecco, 2007); Clary, *The Difficult Politics of Peace*.

190. Thomas Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Policy Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

tional structures *within* states dramatically shape mutual understanding *between* states.

Our theoretical framework sheds light on two of the most consequential international conflicts in postcolonial South Asia.¹⁹¹ Although multiple factors contributed to the onset of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, our analysis suggests a lost chance for peace in 1962 may have stemmed from suboptimal bureaucratic institutions. In contrast, India's effective communication toward Pakistan in 1965 is striking, not only because India was able to secure and maintain a ceasefire, but because it was able to cut through inefficient decision-making in Islamabad.

The theory and findings contribute to understanding how bureaucracies and the noise that they generate shape effective communications in international politics.¹⁹² Our institutional theory complements the existing literature on bureaucratic politics, particularly Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow's *Essence of Decision*, which occasionally discusses (but does not explicitly theorize) the signaling effects of organizational pathology.¹⁹³ We offer the first systematic theoretical account of how these pathologies undermine communication. In contrast to Allison and Zelikow, however, our theory emphasizes the institutional conditions under which these pathologies are likely to emerge—and points to institutional solutions that might remedy the problems to which Allison and Zelikow's theory draws attention.

The theory and findings offer two additional contributions to international relations theory. First, our institutional argument contests canonical accounts of the democratic peace. A long theoretical tradition suggests that democratic institutions, such as the existence of multiple political parties, decrease the risk of communication failure by allowing democracies to send messages that are perceived as credible.¹⁹⁴ The institutional argument advanced in this article in-

191. For discussion of the conflicts in international relations, see: Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 174–197; Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (2011), pp. 437–456, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541100027X>; Clary, *The Difficult Politics of Peace*, chaps. 4–5.

192. Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla A. Clapp, and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006); Matt Malis, “Conflict, Cooperation, and Delegated Diplomacy,” *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Fall 2021), pp. 1018–1057, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000102>; Schub, “Informing the Leader”; Anderson, “Push and Pull on the Periphery”; David Lindsey, *Delegated Diplomacy: How Ambassadors Establish Trust in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); Carcelli, “Bureaucratic Structure and Compliance.”

193. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, pp. 178–179, 273–274, 310.

194. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences”; Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*; Reiter

stead suggests that such theories are insufficient: Open and closed bureaucratic institutions—which exist in both democracies and autocracies—shape whether sending states are able to avoid communication failures by reducing transmission noise. Indeed, the theory and findings show how institutions that elevate transmission noise can undercut the signaling advantages sometimes ascribed to democratic regimes—and offer pathways for authoritarian regimes to also achieve mutual understanding.¹⁹⁵ Bureaucratic institutions thus help explain why institutionalized democracies may fail to communicate effectively during negotiations over war and peace, and why some authoritarian regimes are not doomed to communication failures. In short, international communication is notoriously difficult not simply because the state lacks characteristics that make communications appear more sincere, but because some bureaucracies transmit more noise across international borders.

Second, by integrating sender and receiver dynamics into a unified framework for studying perception and misperception in international politics, the article helps fill an important gap in the literature identified by Robert Jervis.¹⁹⁶ While our theory and evidence do not fully meet this objective, our approach suggests a path forward. Theoretically, applying Shannon's model of international communication shows how some receiver misperceptions actually stem from the choices (and miscalculations) that senders make as they attempt to convey meaning to others. This insight suggests a fruitful line of inquiry for how other sender-side perceptions, dispositions, cultures, and languages provide the foundation for receiver-side misperception, in parallel to the organizational challenges of coordinating and overseeing the behemoth bureaucracies of the modern state to which our argument draws attention. Empirically, one of the challenges to studying misperception is that scholars typically have access to only one side of the signaling coin, which limits

and Stam, *Democracies at War*; Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs"; Rachel Myrick, "The Reputational Consequences of Polarization for American Foreign Policy: Evidence from the U.S.-UK Bilateral Relationship," in Gordon M. Friedrichs and Jordan Tama, eds., *Polarization and U.S. Foreign Policy: When Politics Crosses the Water's Edge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 373–403; Fahd Humayun, "The Punisher's Dilemma: Domestic Opposition and Foreign Policy Crises," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (March 2024), sqae002, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae002>.

195. Elizabeth N. Saunders, *The Insiders' Game: How Elites Make War and Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).

196. Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), chap. 5.

scholars' ability to judge the accuracy of decision-maker perceptions.¹⁹⁷ Our methodology of process-tracing signals demonstrates how pairing the documentary records of two states improves our ability to study misperception in world politics.

Finally, the theory and findings offer a key insight for policymakers: Open institutions can attenuate the communication problems that stem from the division of labor between leaders and the bureaucracy. Prospectively, this conclusion emphasizes the importance of *intrastate* rules and organizations that facilitate connections between leaders and bureaucrats, as well as the potential downsides of cutting such capacity within government. Our argument also underscores why leaders may wish to engage in face-to-face diplomacy—to minimize bureaucratic noise when they are unable to adopt open institutional structures. During the early stages of U.S.-China rapprochement in the early 1970s, for example, in a conversation with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger bemoaned that the U.S. national security bureaucracy was “sometimes not perfectly manageable.”¹⁹⁸ The White House preferred to meet in secret and “unencumbered by bureaucracy.”¹⁹⁹ Thus, leaders may be more likely to centralize and tightly control diplomatic engagements when they suspect that insubordinate bureaucrats are delivering garbled messages that deviate from their instructions.

197. Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

198. Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, July 9, 1971, *FRUS 1969–1976*, Vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, ed. Steven E. Phillips (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 139.

199. *Ibid.*