

This article was downloaded by: [Princeton University]

On: 22 October 2013, At: 05:44

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Security Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsst20>

Tying Hands Behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance

Keren Yarhi-Milo ^a

^a Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

Published online: 01 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Keren Yarhi-Milo (2013) Tying Hands Behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance, *Security Studies*, 22:3, 405-435, DOI: [10.1080/09636412.2013.816126](https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.816126)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.816126>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Tying Hands Behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance

KEREN YARHI-MILO

Private diplomacy and secret agreements among adversaries are major features of international relations. Sometimes secret reassurance has resulted in cooperation and even peace between long-time adversaries. Yet rationalist theories consider private diplomatic communication as cheap talk. How do we explain this gap between theoretical expectations and the empirical record? I offer a theory that explains how, why, and when a leader may convince an enemy that his private reassurances are credible even when they are not costly to undertake. I also account for the conditions under which recipients of such reassurance infer the leader's benign intentions from these secret interactions. I claim that leaders engage in secret reassurance with the enemy when they face significant domestic opposition. The adversary can leverage the initiator's domestic vulnerability by revealing the secret reassurance, thereby imposing domestic punishment on the initiator. Further, by entering into private or secret negotiations and offering their adversary such leverage, initiators generate "autonomous risk" that exists beyond their control. I evaluate this theory against two empirical cases. The first case looks at Richard Nixon's secret assurances to the Chinese leadership in 1972. The second examines the secret negotiations between Israeli officials and the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization that ended with the signing of the Oslo I Accord in 1993.

Keren Yarhi-Milo is an assistant professor of Politics and International Affairs in the Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

For their extremely insightful comments, I am grateful to Gary Bass, Austin Carson, Tom Christensen, Christina Davis, Avery Goldstein, Joanne Gowa, Todd Hall, Robert Jervis, Andrew Kydd, Edward Mansfield, Jonathan Mercer, Kris Ramsay, Caitlin Talmadge, Jessica Weeks, and Alex Weisiger. I also want to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Security Studies* for excellent suggestions. Omar Bashir and Alexander Lanoszka provided superb research assistance. All errors are my own.

For centuries, adversaries have engaged in private diplomacy. Leaders enter secret negotiations and even conclude secret agreements with avowed enemies without the knowledge or consent of the public or other members of government. The secret Hoare-Laval Pact of 1935 was intended to appease Italy by offering it most of Abyssinia; President John Kennedy and the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made private arrangements to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey in order to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis; Richard Nixon confidentially pledged to the Chinese leadership to move toward full normalization during his second term; and Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) concluded the Oslo I Accords behind closed doors. These historic events are just a few examples. Most recently, WikiLeaks released many highly classified State Department documents that revealed private understandings between adversaries and allies alike. This damaging episode left some wondering about the general costs and benefits of secret diplomacy and the conditions under which success is possible.

Leaders enter secret negotiations for various reasons. Secret negotiations allow leaders to circumvent long bureaucratic processes and to avoid pressure from domestic and international groups. Secret diplomacy enables leaders to manage audiences' expectations until they are convinced of the adversary's sincerity and willingness to cooperate. They may also enter secret negotiations with the hope that once both parties are deep into the negotiations, it will be too costly for either side to reverse course, thereby locking them into a cooperative agreement. Further, a leader is likely to be more sincere in private about the scope and nature of concessions he is willing to offer in order to achieve cooperation with an adversary. In public negotiations, David Makovsky writes, "the progress of which is generally reported by the press, both sides thrive on ambiguity and deferring difficult problems. Negotiators therefore tend to play to the home crowd by sprouting uncompromising opening positions."¹

From a signaling perspective, however, the existence of secret agreements between adversaries presents a theoretical puzzle with significant policy implications about the role of secrecy in international politics. *Prima facie*, private diplomatic assurances defy much of the existing scholarship on interstate communication that emphasizes the importance of public commitments as costly signals that help foster cooperation between adversaries. Private diplomatic communication, according to this rationalist perspective, should constitute a costless signal or cheap talk. The act of reassuring an adversary in secret does not directly involve staking a leader's reputation before a domestic audience, as negotiations and the resulting agreements themselves are carried on outside of the public eye. Yet, secret reassurance has resulted in cooperation, and even peace, between longtime enemies.

¹ David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 130.

How can we explain this gap between theoretical expectations and the empirical record?

Specifically, how can leaders convince a distrustful enemy that their private verbal assurances are credible, even when not directly costly to undertake? Why would a recipient of such assurances not suspect that the initiator's intentions are to exploit any cooperative behavior undertaken by the recipients? Under what conditions can recipients of secret assurances discern the initiator's commitment to cooperation?

To address these questions, this article identifies conditions under which secret diplomacy can provide informative signals of an initiator's sincere desire to cooperate.² I argue that when a leader of Country A (hereafter, "the initiator") seeks to engage an adversary without the knowledge and consent of domestic actors who would strongly oppose its policy, the leader of Country B (hereafter, "the adversary") is likely to view the secret channel as credibly demonstrating the trustworthiness of the initiator. This situation arises because the adversary has the ability to take advantage of the domestic vulnerability of the initiator by revealing his secret assurances, thereby imposing domestic punishment on the initiator.³ Moreover, the adversary could exploit the initiator's private gestures by publicly embarrassing the initiator, and claim a diplomatic political victory. The logic of secret reassurance accordingly draws on Thomas Schelling's notion of credible commitment through "hostage-taking" and involves something akin, although not identical, to what James Fearon calls "domestic audience costs."⁴

The credibility of secret reassurance is most likely when several conditions are met. First, the adversary must be sufficiently convinced that the initiator would face domestic punishment if the initiator's concessions are revealed to his domestic audiences. Second, the initiator's costs of having his gestures exposed must outweigh the benefits from deceiving the adversary into thinking that he is sincere. Otherwise, deceitful initiators may mimic sincerity and send reassuring overtures to their adversaries in secret. Finally, for reassurance to be seen as credible, the adversary must not be self-deterred from exposing the initiator.

Aside from the ability of the adversary to strategically reveal the secret reassurance, there is an autonomous risk of leaks from third parties such as journalists, mediators, or disgruntled members of the delegation who can

² As discussed later, some existing accounts of secret diplomacy do not stress credible signaling or information. See, for instance, Bahar Leventoglu and Ahmer Tarar, "Prenegotiation Public Commitment in Domestic and International Bargaining," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (August 2005): 419–33; Shuhei Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy: Public Versus Private Threats in Crisis Diplomacy," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (August 2007): 543–58.

³ Though *Security Studies* usually uses gender-neutral terms whenever possible, this article will use male pronouns when discussing theoretical leaders to avoid cumbersome, awkward language.

⁴ James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92.

reveal—intentionally or not—valuable information about the secret negotiations and the proposed concessions. These leaks can entail potentially serious political costs for the initiator and, sometimes, even the adversary. Thus, this risk of revelation that exists beyond the control of either side may render the secret reassurance a credible signal of cooperative intentions, even in situations where both the initiator and the adversary appear to face serious opposition to engagement.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that secret reassurance, specifically here, refers to a method of communicating promises and assurances to an adversary that involves issues of great public concern, without the knowledge and approval of members of the government, the media, and/or the public.⁵ Initiation of secret reassurance involves a verbal and explicit offering of concessions or overtures as a means of conveying to an adversary the initiator's sincerity in cooperating. In that respect, reassurances are not intended to be noisy or ambiguous. Their purpose is to move an adversarial relationship toward a more cooperative one. At times, the existence of a communication channel with another state is kept secret from domestic actors while, at other times, the content of these talks is undisclosed. Secret reassurances may evolve into public ones, but also may be kept secret forever. Finally, secret reassurance assumes communication via an official channel that, if exposed, cannot be excused as unauthorized.⁶

In sum, this article contributes to the growing literature on the value of private diplomacy by offering a counterintuitive mechanism that makes secret reassurance an informative signal. Secrecy allows leaders to reassure avowed enemies not in spite of, but rather due to, the presence of domestic opposition. Despite its long history, this method of signaling has received little attention from international relations scholars.

The first section of the article reviews the literature on costly signaling and reassurance. The second considers how the preferences of domestic actors shape leaders' choices of reassurance strategy. The third section proposes a theory of secret reassurance and the conditions under which this strategy might signal credibility. The fourth discusses the application of the theory to a subset of cases where secret agreements must be revealed in order to be implemented. The fifth section presents several historical examples, and examines in more detail two historical case studies that flesh out the rationale and deployment of secret reassurance. The first case study looks at Nixon's secret assurances to the Chinese leadership in February 1972. The second examines the secret negotiations between Israeli officials

⁵ Assurances are used "to buttress the target's base expectations, reducing uncertainty about the future." They should not be confused with concessions, which refer to the provision of a demanded good or service used to placate a threat. James Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 12.

⁶ Secret reassurance should not be confused with informal talks where leaders who wish to start negotiations with an enemy put out feelers that can be denied if the enemy's response is not appropriate.

and the leadership of the PLO that led to the signing of the Oslo I agreements in 1993. The sixth section concludes the discussion.

COSTLY SIGNALS AND DOMESTIC AUDIENCES

Research on crisis bargaining emphasizes the importance of costly signals.⁷ If signals are costless, any actor could theoretically send them since there is no “intrinsic meaning or interpretation” to the message, a situation typically referred to as “cheap talk.”⁸ James Fearon argues that state leaders can demonstrate that they are the type of actor who will not back down in a crisis by exposing themselves to ex post audience costs—future costs that will be imposed by either a domestic or foreign audience if the leader backs down after having committed to a course of action.⁹ These public actions effectively tie the hands of democratic and some nondemocratic leaders, committing them to stay the course or suffer unacceptable costs.¹⁰ My discussion of domestic audience costs, however, departs from Fearon’s treatment of the subject. Fearon and subsequent work on audience costs typically focus on how leaders can tie their hands by making public international threats during crises. Domestic audiences, in these models, are expected to punish leaders when they fail to fulfill their commitment. By contrast, I am concerned with how leaders may expect domestic audiences to punish them for engaging in

⁷ Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences”; James D. Morrow, “The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitments, and Negotiation in International Politics,” in *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, ed. David A. Lake and Robert Powell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). For formal models of secret negotiations that do not emphasize the role of information or credible signaling, see Leventoglu and Tarar, “Prenegotiation Public Commitment”; Kurizaki, “Efficient Secrecy.”

⁸ For costless signals, see Jeffrey S. Banks, *Signaling Games in Political Science* (New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), 23. For the meaning of cheap talk in economics literature, see Joseph Farrell and Robert Gibbons, “Cheap Talk with Two Audiences,” *American Economic Review* 79, no. 5 (December 1989): 1214–23; Joseph Farrell and Robert Gibbons, “Cheap Talk Can Matter in Bargaining,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 48, no. 1 (June 1989): 221–37; Joseph Farrell and Matthew Rabin, “Cheap Talk,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 103–18; Vincent P. Crawford and Joel Sobel, “Strategic Information Transmission,” *Econometrica* 50, no. 6 (November 1982): 1431–51; Joel Sobel, “A Theory of Credibility,” *Review of Economic Studies* 52, no. 4 (October 1985): 557–73; Vincent P. Crawford, “Lying for Strategic Advantage: Rational and Boundedly Rational Misrepresentation of Intentions,” *American Economic Review* 93, no. 1 (March 2003): 133–49. In politics, Anne Sartori’s work has shown that diplomatic communication in the absence of costly action can be made credible by states’ willingness to maintain a bargaining reputation. See Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁹ James D. Fearon, “Threats to Use Force: Costly Signals and Bargaining in International Crises” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1992); Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences”; Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*; Kenneth Schultz, “Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War,” *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 233–66; Alastair Smith, “International Crises and Domestic Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 3 (September 1998): 623–38; Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 35–64.

undesirable foreign policy actions behind their backs when such an action is revealed by the adversary or a third party.¹¹ Note that recent critiques of audience cost mechanisms are not directly transferable to the argument in this paper; for instance, Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard argue that audience cost mechanisms rarely operate, partly because prudent leaders hesitate to issue unambiguous public threats. However, the initiation of secret talks requires no such posturing.¹²

If leaders are likely to face domestic punishment for failing to fulfill their public commitments, then they should be selective in making either public or private threats. Accordingly, Mathew Baum claims that unless a leader is confident of the success of his threat, or unless important national security interests are at stake, a leader will wish to minimize the potential political costs of a foreign policy failure by not making a public threat.¹³ David Stasavage constructs a model in order to determine whether secret negotiation is better for the public in terms of both likely bargaining success and accountability.¹⁴ More recently, Shuhei Kurizaki demonstrates formally that it is sometimes optimal for leaders to make private threats in crisis situations if a publicly threatened state will lose face by backing down. In contrast to the argument presented here, Kurizaki posits that secret threats work because they are efficient, rather than because they are capable of conveying information.¹⁵ His concern with threats instead of assurances is consequential: the efficacy of private diplomacy in his model follows from the forgone opportunity to make public threats. Yet, my argument is concerned with a scenario in which public assurances are not an option for the initiator. The scope of information transmission is greater in the context of assurances because the adversary's choice to "go public" with the initiator's advances is fundamentally different if they are threats rather than assurances. Finally, Bahar Leventoglu and Ahmer Tarar show that audience costs can be used instrumentally for increased bargaining leverage in secret negotiations over a divisible good.¹⁶ Again, the authors' mechanism works "even in a complete information setting in which audience costs have no signaling value."¹⁷ Thus, the informational account of success in secret diplomacy described in this

¹¹ Audience costs in this framework are expected costs. The fear of domestic backlash is more important than the eventual existence or absence of backlash. I thank a reviewer for this point.

¹² For theoretical and empirical criticism of audience cost theory, see, for example, Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 437–56; Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 2012): 3–42; Alexander B. Downes and Todd S. Sechser, "The Illusion of Democratic Credibility," *International Organization* 66, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 457–89.

¹³ Matthew A. Baum, "Going Private," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (October 2004): 603–31.

¹⁴ David Stasavage, "Open-Door or Closed-Door? Transparency in Domestic and International Bargaining," *International Organization* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 667–703.

¹⁵ Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy"; Leventoglu and Tarar, "Prenegotiation Public Commitment."

¹⁶ Leventoglu and Tarar, "Prenegotiation Public Commitment."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 429.

work is a contribution to the literature. As will be shown, the historical record supports a focus on information about intentions that private assurances can convey under certain conditions.

Some scholars have also applied the theory of costly signaling to the issue of reassurance. Andrew Kydd does not account for the success of secret assurances in his analysis, but his emphasis on trust is consistent with the approach presented here. He argues that certain signals—those demonstrating credibly that “one is moderate, not out to get the other side, willing to live and let live, preferring to reciprocate cooperation”¹⁸—function by increasing an adversary’s perception of initiator trustworthiness. Since Kydd defines trust as a belief that the other side is likely to want to “reciprocate cooperation rather than exploit it,” such signals make agreements more likely by reducing the perceived risk of being suckered. Simply put, the sender uses costly (and public) signals to generate trust by conveying to the receiver that it will not exploit any cooperative behavior. I adopt the same definition of trust in this paper, although I analyze it in the context of secret communication.¹⁹

Finally, although the argument in this paper is that private diplomacy, under particular circumstances, constitutes a form of a costly signal, one should not exaggerate the necessity or sufficiency of costly signals in revealing information about intentions. Indeed, as Robert Jervis notes, information about intentions can be gleaned from signals that may be “costless” in nature, but are understood, from the perspective of the recipient, to be beyond the ability of the sender to control (i.e., an index).²⁰ Empirically, scholars have shown that at times leaders ignored costly signals, or believed signals that logically they should not have believed.²¹ In testing the efficacy of secret reassurance in this paper, we should therefore go beyond clarifying how

¹⁸ Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 187.

¹⁹ Like Andrew Kydd, I argue that trust can be established even between adversaries in a way that allows cooperation to take place. This situation arises when the parties take on risk by entering into an agreement that could make them into a “suckered” player. Assurances, because of the context of secrecy highlighted in this article, can make hesitant adversaries more likely to strike a bargain in which the initiator’s defection is the worst-case scenario. I diverge from Kydd as my mechanism of signaling is distinct from the types of costly signaling he proposes. See Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 325–57.

²⁰ Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Robert Jervis, “Signaling and Perception: Drawing Inferences and Projecting Images” in *Political Psychology*, ed. Kristen Renwick Monroe (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002); Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

²¹ Jervis, *Logic of Images*; Keren Yarhi-Milo, “In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries,” *International Security* 38, no. 1 (forthcoming). Studies in economics, biology, and political science have identified the importance of non-costly signals in communicating intentions. For instance, see John Krebs and Richard Dawkins, “Animal Signals: Mind-Reading and Manipulation” in *Behavioural Ecology: An Evolutionary Approach*, 2nd ed., ed. J. R. Krebs and N. B. Davies (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 1984); Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy*; Robert F. Trager, “Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters,” *American Political Science*

these mechanisms should work in theory. Instead, to the extent possible, we should seek to uncover empirical evidence of these mechanisms in the historical record.

MULTIPLE AUDIENCES AND THE CHOICE TO REASSURE IN SECRET

States are Janus-faced, simultaneously needing to project images to both an international and domestic audience.²² Sometimes leaders can deploy signals that will satisfy both audiences, and they may choose to reassure through unilateral public commitments. However, many times these audiences expect different, if not contradictory, signals from the state.

Agreements are sometimes conducted in secret due to various reasons such as a desire to avoid cumbersome bureaucratic processes or a belief in the effectiveness of a diplomacy insulated from the pressure of domestic and international groups. The focus of this paper, however, is on a subset of cases in which leaders pursue secret negotiations to signal to an adversary that their intentions are benign despite significant domestic opposition. These leaders believe that reassuring an adversary—even when it requires painful concessions—can yield results that are preferable to the status quo. However, because the initiator lacks domestic support for such a policy, he is likely to face a serious dilemma upon assuming state power. Initiating peace talks to resolve enduring rivalries or to reassure a country that is seen as a source of a major threat may make the leader vulnerable to exploitation by the adversary. At the domestic level, this situation can exacerbate disagreements over the adversary's intentions and the scope of concessions that a state should offer and receive in return.²³ A drastic reversal of a long-standing foreign policy toward a hated state can be especially difficult when domestic opponents, seeking to capitalize on fear and distrust, can undermine the personal and political fortunes of leaders who initiate reassurance.

Domestic actors might punish a leader for a variety of reasons. They may oppose the risk of initiating secret reassurance toward a hated adversary because of acrimonious history, significant differences in ideologies, and/or because the adversary could take advantage of the concessions offered to him. Moreover, they might believe that the initiating leader made himself

Review 104, no. 2 (May 2010): 347–68. Nevertheless, the rationalist literature on signaling in international relations has predominantly focused on the importance of costly communication.

²² Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 427–60; Andrew Moravcsik, "Introduction: Integrating International and Domestic Theories of International Bargaining" in *Double-Edged Diplomacy*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²³ Kenneth A. Schultz, "The Politics of Risking Peace: Do Hawks or Doves Deliver the Olive Branch?" *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 1–38.

vulnerable to exploitation by the adversary. After all, the adversary could renege on a secret agreement, divulge sensitive information, and embarrass the initiator in order to claim a diplomatic victory or a strategic advantage. Third, domestic actors may decry a lack of engagement with the public (especially in democracies), with government agencies, or with the ruling elite (in both democracies and nondemocracies). In democracies, political punishment can be effectively mounted by the electorate, the selectorate, or the winning coalition.²⁴ Expectations of significant backlash from any of these three domestic audiences provide incentives for a democratic leader to reassure an adversary in secret. In nondemocracies, a leader is likely to be mostly concerned about the consequences of initiating secret reassurance in the face of opposition from the ruling elite in his country, or when the exposure of secret dealings could discredit the regime's ideology or source of legitimacy.²⁵

Thus, leaders who decide to pursue such reassurance initiatives—for example, as a result of private information they have about the risks and benefits of engaging an adversary, or a change in their beliefs about the adversary's intentions—might risk their political survival. The assassinations of leaders such as Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat indicate that the risks involved in making peace with the enemy may cost more than just one's office. Further, if the adversary rejects a leader's reassurance efforts, or if the adversary takes advantage of reassurance efforts, that leader may consequently be punished by his domestic constituents.²⁶

For example, seeking to maintain vital strategic relations with China, but constrained by strong domestic opposition from Republicans, Congress, and the American public, President George H. W. Bush engaged in secret reassurance in the late 1980s to improve relations with China after the Tiananmen Square crackdown.²⁷ However, the Chinese leadership, "eager to showcase symbolic aspects of the trip to demonstrate to Chinese and foreign audiences that China was emerging from isolation and being visited by important foreign guests," revealed to the world the existence of the diplomatic exchange.²⁸ Domestic audiences in the United States were outraged,

²⁴ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Silversson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2003), 51.

²⁵ Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sandcastles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 50; Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs."

²⁶ Indeed, Michael Colaresi has found that democratic leaders who offer unreciprocated cooperation to an adversary often pay an electoral price. Michael Colaresi, "When Doves Cry: International Rivalry, Unreciprocated Cooperation, and Leadership Turnover," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3 (July 2004): 555–70.

²⁷ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 206–08.

²⁸ Robert Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations 1989–2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2003), 93–103; Mann, *About Face*, 220.

criticizing the president for his soft treatment of China, and for “misleading” and “lying to” Congress. Against this background, Robert Suettinger notes, “President Bush no doubt realized that any efforts to improve relations that required congressional approval would be nearly impossible to carry out.”²⁹

THE CREDIBILITY OF SECRET REASSURANCE

From a signaling perspective, effectively communicating reassurance in secret toward an adversary poses significant problems as secret negotiations, at times, involve promises that are neither inherently costly nor publicly declared. However, secret reassurance under several conditions contains a counterintuitive mechanism that may allow a leader to overcome this difficulty, and credibly communicate his benign intentions, thereby raising the probability of cooperation. I consider two logics for secret diplomacy: one that focuses on the idea of “strategic revelation” by the adversary and another centering on the notion of “autonomous leak risk.” The two are similar in that revelation poses a cost to the initiator regardless of whether the adversary or the third party reveals secret overtures; however, “autonomous leak risk” underpins credibility in situations where “strategic revelation” cannot function because the adversary is also reluctant to reveal.

Strategic Revelation by the Adversary

Recall that the scenario begins with the leader of one state initiating a cooperative gesture to an enemy. The initiator makes the first move, reaching out to the adversary in secret. The adversary can decide whether to immediately publicly reveal the initiator’s message, or to reciprocate the gesture by taking some concrete action.³⁰ However, the initiator then has the opportunity to renege on nascent cooperation.

Given uncertainty about the initiator’s intentions, how can the adversary determine whether the initiator is engaging in secret diplomacy only to renege after the adversary changes course? I argue that the initiator can reassure the adversary of his sincerity because the adversary may expose the initiator’s gesture and impose political costs in the event of renegeing

²⁹ Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 102.

³⁰ The adversary has other strategies that I will not discuss extensively. First, the adversary might go public and then make a counteroffer, punishing the initiator, and then exploiting the initiator’s benign intentions; second, the adversary might propose a public counteroffer without announcing the initiator’s secret overture. The adversary should prefer the latter of these two options since in the second he can exploit the initiator’s type without risking that an embarrassing revelation that might alienate the initiator. Still, the adversary should prefer to make any counteroffer in secret (rather than either of these options) if he is apprehensive about its own domestic opposition.

or exploitation.³¹ The adversary thus needs to believe that by going against the preferences of domestic audiences and initiating reassurance in secret, the initiator has taken a significant political risk. The risk stems from the fact that if domestic actors become aware of their leader's actions, they will have the means and incentives to punish him. After all, the process of initiating reassurance with a hated enemy often involves a promise of strategic concessions or signs of restraint.

Now consider the perspective of the adversary. During the negotiation process, the initiator is exposed to domestic punishment if his contacts or concessions are strategically revealed by the adversary. In the adversary's eyes, the risky action of placing one's political fate in the hands of his enemy is a credible signal of the initiator's trustworthiness. The idea is akin to Schelling's original notion of making credible commitments by handing the adversary a "hostage" and hinges on something similar to what Fearon describes as "domestic audience costs."³²

I argue that this mechanism of secret reassurance, under several cumulative conditions, may allow for the initiator to credibly reveal his sincerity in cooperation. First, the credibility of the initiator's concessions depends on some presumptions about the preferences of the relevant domestic audiences. For the theory to operate, domestic audiences should be sufficiently distrustful of the adversary so that they would object to the initial sending of reassuring gestures and would want to punish their leaders for doing so.³³ For secret reassurance to work, however, domestic audiences' preferences cannot be too hawkish. Otherwise, they would prefer to reward, rather than punish, a leader who managed to sucker the adversary.³⁴ This condition can also be interpreted in the following way: for an untrustworthy type to be deterred from sending a reassuring signal in secret, the benefit of suckering an adversary must be less than the cost of having the private gesture exposed. Overall, for secret reassurance to work as suggested in the theory, domestic audiences' preferences ought to be moderately hawkish. The preferences of the initiator should be less hawkish than his domestic audiences, or he should have some other reason (such as additional private information about the payoffs of an agreement) to be less distrustful of the adversary.

Second, credibility is subjective. Thus, an adversary needs to be sufficiently convinced that the initiator would face domestic punishment if the

³¹ The initiator could credibly reveal intentions by sending an intrinsically costly signal in private. I do not explore this possibility.

³² Schelling, *The Strategic of Conflict*.

³³ The punishment of leaders may not always take place automatically. However, as I show empirically, initiators act as if they fear hawkish audiences would punish initiating leaders—and adversaries may suspect the same—if secret conciliatory attempts are revealed.

³⁴ The "suckering" scenario can, in some cases, be very helpful to the initiator. For instance, the initiator might want to buy time with a cease-fire agreement, only to renege later.

initiator's overtures were revealed to the initiator's domestic audience. Information about the preferences of the initiator and his domestic audiences, and the likelihood of the punishment he might face, should be available to the adversary. Admittedly, gauging the preferences of the initiator's domestic audiences is an incredibly challenging task and may be prone to misperceptions and manipulations, especially in nondemocracies. Similarly, democratic initiators whose public is politically divided would also require that the adversary have a nuanced understanding of the domestic political landscape that the initiator faces. In the absence of such information, uncertainty over how the initiator's domestic audiences would react, may lead the adversary to abandon the secret channel. Alternatively, he may ask the initiator to make intrinsically costly commitments that would reveal his intentions through another mechanism.

Finally, even if the adversary is convinced of the risk the initiator faces, the adversary himself must not be self-deterred from ever revealing the agreement in order for the secret channel to be an informative signal of the initiator's trustworthiness.³⁵ Indeed, if the initiator knows that the adversary would never reveal the agreement, then the former is not genuinely vulnerable to punishment by the latter. To be sure, the adversary's calculation regarding whether to reveal involves several factors such as the political and reputational costs he would incur from defecting, the benefits he would gain from exposing the initiator's reassurance efforts, the benefits he expects to gain from reaching an agreement, and his assessment that the likelihood of negotiations will succeed or be exposed before a mutual agreement is reached. These calculations, however, should not distract us from the simple logic that guides secret reassurance: as long as the initiator does not face significant opposition to engagement, the adversary is likely to find that the unilaterally risky decision by the initiator to reassure him in secret reflects cooperative intentions.

WHEN TO EXPOSE?³⁶

Depending on the political context, strategic revelation by the adversary can assume two forms. First, an adversary can reveal the mere existence of secret talks. This action could be politically damaging for the initiator only in cases where the latter has previously demanded in public that negotiations can only take place after certain preconditions have been met, and that

³⁵ I do not argue that the adversary must have an incentive to reveal. Instead, it must not be prohibitively damaging for the adversary to reveal secret negotiations.

³⁶ The adversary's decision of whether to reveal cannot be taken as the only indicator of the success or failure of secret reassurance. Nevertheless, the focus here is on whether the initiator has been able to change the adversary's beliefs about his intentions despite the non-public (and therefore seemingly costless) way by which he conveyed his assurances.

they have not been met to date, or because talking to the adversary is considered a crime. Such was the case in Israel where, for many years, a law prohibited negotiations with a terrorist organization that is responsible for killing civilians. Second, an adversary can increase the level of disclosure and reveal the initiator's assurances and concessions during the negotiation process before or after an agreement is reached. In the former case, the adversary might enjoy more leverage over the initiator and could potentially inflict greater political cost. Still, revealing assurances and concessions after the conclusion of an agreement is possible as well; this is also true in cases where the agreement was intended by the initiator to remain secret at least as long as he remains in office.³⁷

At the same time, the domestic public might approve of the contact once it comes along with the advantages of an agreement. The initial contacts could be seen as only involving costs. Nevertheless, if the contacts are successful the gains of an agreement may be seen as large enough. And yet, even when an agreement is reached in secret, the fear of punishment from domestic groups may inhibit leaders from publicizing the agreement that had been reached in secret. Consider the 1980 secret agreement between members of the British and Argentinian governments over the Falkland Islands. After reaching a secret agreement to surrender sovereignty over the islands and a simultaneous leaseback, the British officials involved were concerned about whether the agreement could be "justified to the islanders, parliament, and the country as a whole." As the British chief negotiator, Nicholas Ridley, explains in a secret memo, "If we cannot sell it to them [the islanders], it is hopeless. If we can sell it to them, the opposition here at home will have little but straw to make bricks with."³⁸ Ultimately, the British government decided not to reveal the agreement and asked the Argentinean government to patiently wait until the British could secure the endorsement of the islanders for formal negotiations based on leaseback.³⁹

The Logic of Autonomous Leak Risk

Both parties might engage in secret reassurance in the face of domestic political opposition. This scenario resembles "mutual assured destruction" (MAD) in which the risk of punishment deters both sides from defecting. From the perspective of the initiator, this scenario is preferable to one in which he

³⁷ Leaders should anticipate that even secret agreements will one day become public, but they presumably assume that that they will no longer be in power when it happens and therefore will not incur punishment. Alternatively, the initiator may be hoping that he can implement the secret agreement without the knowledge of his audiences. Thus, as long as the adversary does not reveal the secret, he can continue this form of cooperation out of the public eye.

³⁸ Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign. Volume I: The Origins of the Falklands War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 118.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 113–33.

alone faces domestic punishment. Nevertheless, according to my proposed mechanism, the adversary should not see the secret channel as credibly revealing the initiator's cooperative intentions, as the adversary is likely to be self-deterred from exposing. Yet, even in these MAD-like situations, the secret channel may be credible because a third party, such as journalists, mediators, or disgruntled insiders, can reveal the secret negotiations. The risk of such a disclosure, in other words, "must come from somewhere outside the threatener's control . . . [I]t is an ingredient in the situation" that neither side can "entirely control."⁴⁰ Third-party actors may intentionally reveal information about secret talks and concessions because of ideological or political convictions, or they may unintentionally leak information without realizing the potentially adverse consequences. The level of risk may be higher for democratic initiators because they have less control over the media and their countries likely contain more players with access to the secret information.

The analogous situation in deterrence theory seems to be what Schelling calls the "threat that leaves something to chance" that creates what Robert Powell describes as "autonomous risk." This element of risk exists beyond the control of the parties involved, suggesting that the magnitude of the chance taken affects the credibility of the action. As Powell explains, "[t]he expected cost of taking a step-that-leaves-something-to-chance varies with the level of the autonomous risk that taking the step creates. If, therefore, the risk is sufficiently small, the expected cost of taking the step may be less than the expected cost of submitting."⁴¹ When the risk of undesirable disclosure is high, the credibility of the initiator's signal for cooperation is stronger. Accordingly, leaders who undertake secret reassurance do so when their intentions to cooperate are sincere. Indeed, the risk of revelation from such exogenous actors is absolutely necessary in these MAD-like situations in order to make the logic of secret reassurance work from the perspective of the adversary. Incurring such risks reveals leader types because an insincere leader will not risk the costs of secret reassurance, given that other actors beyond his control can impose significant political costs on him at any point through revelation.⁴²

The danger of autonomous leak is real. As a recent example, in May 2011, the Arabic language news network Al Jazeera released 1,600 leaked documents detailing nearly a decade's worth of secret negotiations between Israel and the PLO. These papers, according to Al Jazeera, "show the PLO offering concessions that would have been overwhelmingly rejected by the Palestinian public, and receiving nothing in return from an Israeli government that

⁴⁰ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 118.

⁴¹ Robert Powell, "Crisis Bargaining, Escalation, and MAD," *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 3 (September 1987): 720.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 719.

budgeted little on core issues.”⁴³ That episode significantly embarrassed the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, and the PLO more generally, leading the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, to resign. To be sure, Hamas officials hailed the release of the papers, calling the negotiations treason, “a betrayal of precious and long-held national goals.”⁴⁴ Similarly, the recent WikiLeaks revelations of numerous State Department cables pointing to the existence of secret agreements led to increased fears that foreign leaders may no longer enter secret negotiations with the United States in the future. Nevertheless, from a signaling perspective, if an adversary and the initiator both prefer private negotiations to preserving the status quo (and both share significant opposition to negotiations), the autonomous risk of a leak may not only reveal cooperative intentions, but may also incentivize both sides to reach swift settlements in order to avoid revelation by exogenous actors.

A SPECIAL CASE: AGREEMENTS THAT REQUIRE REVELATION

Secret reassurance is significantly more challenging for the initiator when implementation of an agreement requires revelation, as in the case of peace agreements that involve transfer of territories. In the case of agreements that remain secret, domestic-audience preferences simply serve as a hand-tying mechanism; in the case of agreements that require revelation, the preferences of domestic audiences matter for the implementation of the agreement. In such instances, an initiating leader must not only convince his adversary that his intentions to cooperate are sincere, but must also reach an agreement that can later be sold domestically. The initiator’s decision to enter secret talks, therefore, likely indicates his belief that although domestic audiences are reluctant at the present moment to engage with the adversary, they will prefer mutual agreement over the status quo once they are presented with a *fait accompli* (i.e., a reciprocated agreement) that exceeds their *ex ante* expectations, or provides proof of the adversary’s trustworthiness.

Two possible reasons exist for why the initiating state’s domestic preferences might change once presented with an agreement. First, the very fact that the adversary kept his promise to uphold secrecy during negotiations, as well as his willingness to reciprocate cooperation, may serve as important information about the trustworthiness and sincerity of that adversary. Thus, the secret channel provides the adversary with an opportunity to reveal his type to the initiator’s domestic audience—a factor that may greatly influence the latter’s decision to support an agreement even if it was negotiated behind their backs. A second mechanism draws on insight from prospect theory: the

⁴³ See “2011: A Year in Review,” *Al Jazeera*, 31 December 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/aljazeeratop102011/>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

initiator may be able to convince those opposed to reassurance in the first place to change their minds by strategically framing the agreement in the domain of gains; however, this might only be possible when an agreement is presented as a *fait accompli*.⁴⁵ To reiterate, before negotiations begin, the leader himself is uncertain as to what concessions the adversary is willing to offer. As a result, the public discussion is likely to revolve around the concessions the initiator would have to offer, placing the entire reassurance agenda in the domain of losses rather than gains.

Overall, in this subset of secret agreements, domestic audiences might not initially prefer cooperation to the status quo and would punish the initiator for offering any reassurances to the adversary. Nevertheless, at the same time, they can be persuaded that cooperation is preferable to the status quo if they are presented with a reciprocated agreement. The key challenge for a leader in this subset of cases would be to convince his domestic opposition that going behind their backs resulted in a positive outcome that could not have been achieved otherwise.

From the perspective of the adversary, two points require emphasis. First, the signaling mechanism is still important in this scenario, but the window of opportunity for the adversary to reveal is shorter. That is, the adversary can still inflict domestic punishment on the initiator upon receiving his first round of assurances. However, for reasons discussed above, the risk of punishment for the initiator might decrease, the closer the two sides come to reaching an agreement. Second, since implementation of such agreements ultimately hinges on the preferences of the initiators' domestic audiences or those of future leaders who may choose not to abide by the terms of the agreement, the adversary might be concerned about the implementation of an agreement, even if concluded in good faith. Indeed, an adversary, who receives overtures from the leader of a democracy via secret reassurances, may doubt the initiator's ability to convince his constituents, cabinet, or the parliament to accept the agreement he has signed. In some cases this situation can put serious constraints on the ability of leaders to engage in productive negotiations.

Admittedly, secret negotiations that ultimately must be revealed are less likely to be pursued due to uncertainty about domestic audiences and the viability of implementation. Yet the case study of the secret negotiations between Israel and the PLO over the Oslo I Accords detailed below nicely captures how and why, notwithstanding such reservations, the signaling mechanism proposed here was crucial to the success of this historical agreement.

⁴⁵ Rose McDermott, "Prospect Theory and Negotiation," in *Negotiated Risks: International Talks on Hazardous Issues*, ed. Rudolf Avenhaus and Gunnar Sjöstedt (Laxenburg, Austria: Springer, 2009), 102.

THE PRACTICE OF SECRET REASSURANCE: HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

The ability of leaders to engage in successful secret reassurance is historically mixed. Attempts to secretly reassure have, at times, been exposed before agreement, resulting in significant domestic backlash against the leader. For example, President Ronald Reagan's secret arms sales to Iran sparked a massive domestic outcry that overshadowed much of his second term, partially because it violated the US arms embargo that was in place since 1979.⁴⁶ To be sure, the universe of observable cases of secret reassurances is likely misleading. We have no way of gauging the relative success rate of secret agreements in fostering cooperation, since we know very little about the population of leaders' attempts to engage in secret diplomacy. As a result, we cannot be certain whether cases of revelation are normal or exceptional, or whether revelations were a result of failure to reassure or other factors. Recognizing these difficulties, I present two historical cases that meet the theoretical criteria as to when secret reassurance is likely to work.

The cases I present involve secret reassurances that the United States gave China, and Israel gave the PLO. The cases provide variation on several factors, including the status of the negotiations, the political orientation of the initiators, and the adversary's characteristics and calculus on whether to reveal. The cases demonstrate that despite these differences the political incentives for reassurance in secret, and the credibility mechanism attached to the secret option, are consistent with the argument I have laid out. One limitation of these cases is that they both involve democratic initiators. Yet, the materials available in both cases allow us to investigate the political considerations that led both initiators to reassure in secret. Of course, reviewing internal Chinese or Palestinian deliberations during the negotiation process would permit us to determine with greater confidence how they regarded secret reassurance. Unfortunately, these records are not available, requiring me to rely on alternative sources.

The Nixon-Kissinger Secret Talks with China (February, 1972)

On 15 July 1971, President Nixon announced his acceptance of an invitation to visit the People's Republic of China. After two decades of hostilities, this brief televised announcement astonished not only the American public, but also US allies and adversaries. The official announcement of the Nixon administration's intentions of rapprochement with China ended secret meetings

⁴⁶ See the President's Special Review Board, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987), 18–50.

between Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, and third parties that had begun in 1970. These meetings prepared the groundwork for Nixon's trip to China in February 1972. During this historic week in February, Nixon met on a daily basis with Zhou Enlai and had one private meeting with the Communist Party chairman, Mao Zedong.

This time, the talks were public knowledge. The substantive content of these conversations was not. Neither daily press briefings nor much hard news about the high-level discussions were released. "Never before," complained John Chancellor from NBC News, "had an American President traveled abroad in peacetime under such a cloak of secrecy."⁴⁷ What is notable in this case is the unprecedented set of assurances Nixon had offered China on Taiwan, and his efforts to reassure China with regard to US relations with the Soviet Union. The nature of Nixon's cooperative gestures remained secret until declassification in 2003. In the paragraphs that follow, I rely on the declassified transcripts to argue that the logic and mechanism of secret reassurance are consistent with the historical evidence.

Nixon's interests can be gleaned from the notes he jotted down for himself on his way to China. In his view, Chinese interests included "build[ing] up their world credentials," "Taiwan," and "get[ting] the US out of Asia." Nixon's interests included "Indo China (?)," "Communication—to restrain Chinese expansion in Asia," and "reduc[ing the] threat of confrontation by Chinese Super Power."⁴⁸ From China's perspective, Nixon had to reassure them that the United States did not intend to exploit the China card to advance its relations with, and bargaining power over, the Soviet Union. Nixon also had to convince them he was genuinely interested in establishing strategic relations with China that would eventually lead to a normalization of relations, the purpose of which would eventually end China's dissatisfaction and anger stemming from US relations with Taiwan. From Nixon's and Kissinger's perspective, the Chinese needed to be reassured on two main issues: the Soviet Union and Taiwan.

To address China's concerns, Kissinger and Nixon took significant actions—actions that they could not have taken in public—to convince the Chinese that the United States did not intend to collude with the Soviet Union in order to harm China. In Kissinger's earlier visit to China, he gave Zhou a remarkable assurance: the United States would tell China in detail about any understanding it had made with the Soviet Union affecting China's interests. Zhou wanted to see this extraordinary promise in writing, and so Kissinger made sure Nixon included this pledge in a secret letter he would send to Zhou a few days later. American reassurances on the Soviet issue were

⁴⁷ Quoted in Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changes the World* (New York: Random House, 2000), 274.

⁴⁸ Yukinori Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy: Nixon, Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 204; MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 234.

even more extensive during Nixon's visit. For example, during his meeting with Qiao Guanhua, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ye Jianying, the vice-chairman of China's Military Affairs Commission, Kissinger shared top-secret American intelligence reports on Soviet capabilities and the state of discussions between the United States and the Soviet Union. By revealing this information, Kissinger hoped to achieve two related goals: heighten the sense of threat from the Soviet Union and build trust by revealing sensitive information. Indeed, as Kissinger himself admitted to the Chinese, "much of what he gave the Chinese was not known even at the highest levels of the State Department because Nixon and Kissinger preferred to use their own secret channels in dealing with Moscow."⁴⁹

Nixon also sought to reassure China by offering far-reaching assurances regarding Taiwan. He opened the conversation with Zhou by stating "There is one China" and "Taiwan is part of China." Nixon then reiterated some of the understandings that had been reached between Kissinger and Zhou in their secret meetings. Specifically, Nixon pledged that the United States would not support any Taiwanese independence movements, that the United States would use its influence to keep Japan out of Taiwan and to keep Taiwan from attacking the mainland, and that he would gradually reduce American forces on the island in conjunction with the resolution of the Vietnam War.⁵⁰ To be sure, some of these assurances were included in the public communiqué that was issued following the visit. However, Nixon's pledge to move toward full normalization with China early in his second term, and by implication his commitment to recognize the PRC as the "sole legal government of China," were not included in Nixon's public statements or in his briefings to members of Congress upon his return home.⁵¹

Nixon and Kissinger recognized the value of secret negotiations. As William Burr writes, "although [they] saw those and other reassurances on Taiwan as essential for us-China rapprochement, they insisted on secrecy to minimize problems with Taiwan, an old Cold War ally, and its political allies in the United States."⁵² Consistent with the logic of secret reassurance presented above, the transcripts indicate that Nixon and Kissinger chose this method of signaling predominantly out of concern for domestic reactions. They also considered the political price Nixon would pay if his private reassurances on Taiwan were revealed to his domestic constituents, or even to certain Republicans. Indeed, in conversing with Zhou, Nixon identified which domestic audiences he expected would mount opposition to his policy and why:

⁴⁹ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 242.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 259; Komine, *Secrecy in US Foreign Policy*, 208–209.

⁵¹ Alan Romberg, *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and US-PRC Relations* (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003), 41 and 49.

⁵² Cover note, National Security Archive Collection, Nixon's Trip to China [hereafter *NSA Collection*], http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC_readers/kissinger/nixzhou/index.html.

The problem here, Mr. Prime Minister, is not in what we are going to do, the problem is what we are going to say about it . . . my record shows that I can always do more than I can say, once I have made the decision as to the direction of our policy Let me in complete candor tell the Prime Minister what my problem is, from a political standpoint. *What we say here may make it impossible for me to deliver on what I can do.* Our people, from both the right and the left, for different reasons, are watching this particular issue. The left wants this trip to fail, not because of Taiwan but because of the Soviet Union. And the right, for deeply principled ideological reasons, believes that no concessions at all should be made regarding Taiwan.⁵³

Nixon was well-aware that other US officials paid a political price for going against the preferences of the public, noting, “The Prime Minister may think we’re being too careful, but as you know, we have the Pentagon papers from the previous Administration, and we’ve had the Anderson papers from this Administration, and Dr. Kissinger and I have determined that this will never happen in the new relationship that we have established with his (the Prime Minister’s) government.”⁵⁴ Maintaining secrecy was therefore critical for Nixon and Kissinger.

Nixon understood that his Chinese interlocutors might view his reassurances on Taiwan as cheap talk. He noted: “The Prime Minister as a sophisticated observer of the American political scene, could very well interpret what I have said as being a self-serving statement, and solely devoted to assuring my political survival.” Yet Nixon reiterated that, at present, he could not undertake a unilateral public initiative. His own political survival was at stake and both sides, he reasoned to Zhou, had a common interest in maintaining secrecy. But Nixon understood that by being explicit about the scope and extent of his political opposition, he was essentially making himself vulnerable. If the Chinese chose to reveal his assurances, that would give his domestic opposition at home “the opportunity to gang up and say in effect that the American President went to Peking and sold Taiwan down the river.”⁵⁵ Indeed, the Chinese were made fully aware of the risk the hawkish president was undertaking by raising these proposals. For example, in another conversation between Kissinger and Zhou, the former promised that once Nixon would be reelected, he would be able to establish full and normal diplomatic relations. “Other political leaders,” he continued, “would be destroyed by what is called the China lobby in the U.S. if they ever tried to move even partially in the direction which I have described to you.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Memoranda of conversations (MemCon), 22 February 1972, 2:10–6:10 pm, National Security Archive Collection (NSA Collection), 6 (emphasis added).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁶ Quoted in MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 257.

Nixon's ultimate goal, should he be reelected, was to announce his new policy to the American public once the war in Vietnam ended. To convince Zhou that he in fact intended to act on his word even if he continued to face domestic opposition, Nixon relied on his reputation as a leader who often did more than he declared in public: "To give you an example, when I ordered action with regard to the Seventh Fleet, there was opposition in our bureaucracy, but I did that. And as Vietnam is concluded, as it will be concluded one way or another, the removal of two-thirds of our forces (on Taiwan) will be done. There will be opposition, but it will be done."⁵⁷

However, Nixon could not commit on exactly when he was to go public with his pledge and take the costly actions he promised to the Chinese. Reiterating the domestic backlash he was likely to face by revealing his foreign policy intentions to his own domestic audience, Nixon highlighted the constraints he was facing and outlined his plan of action:

I don't mean 1,000 years, nor do I mean ten years on this issue. . . . If I should win the election, I have five years to achieve it. I cannot, for the reasons just mentioned, now make a secret deal and shake hands and say that within the second term it will be done. If I did that, I would be at the mercy of the press if they asked that question. I don't want to say that. . . .

Now if someone asks me when I return, do you have a deal with the Prime Minister that you are going to withdraw all the American forces from Taiwan I will say "no." But I am telling the Prime Minister that is my plan, and as step-by-step I withdraw I can develop the support that I will need to get the approval from our Congress for that.⁵⁸

What did the Chinese leadership infer from Nixon's secret pledge? This question is difficult to answer given the lack of access to direct evidence about China's perceptions of Nixon during or after his visit. The evidence is, by necessity, more speculative regarding Chinese calculations, but it is possible to check the consistency of the theory with the limited information that can be gleaned from meeting transcripts. Specifically, the transcripts contain two key revelations. First, Zhou seems to have recognized that Nixon had taken a risk by pursuing normalization with China, remarking casually in one of the conversations, "You have also risked something to come to China."⁵⁹ It is unclear, however, if Zhou is referring to the public act of

⁵⁷ MemCon, 24 February 1972, 5:15–8:05 pm, NSA Collection, 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11–12. In another conversation between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, the former promised that once Richard Nixon would be reelected, he would be able to establish full and normal diplomatic relations. "Other political leaders," he continued, "would be destroyed by what is called the China lobby in the U.S. if they ever tried to move even partially in the direction which I have described to you." Quoted in MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 257.

⁵⁹ MemCon, 23 February 1972, 2:00–6:00 pm, NSA Collection, 14.

visiting China, or to Nixon's assurances to China that he articulated during his visit.

A second and more significant observation is that the Chinese leadership appears to have realized the potential cost they could inflict on Nixon if they were to reveal the content of Nixon's concessions on Taiwan, or the intelligence reports on Soviet capabilities that Kissinger had shared. The way they chose to express the power they had over the American president was not by threatening to expose his concessions, but by reassuring him that they would not inflict those punishments on him even if he did not execute his pledge on Taiwan immediately. In Zhou's words to Nixon, China was "not rushing to make use of the opponents of your present visit and attempt to solve all the questions and place you in an embarrassing position."⁶⁰ The statement is significant because it shows how the Chinese leadership understood the risky business of secret reassurance and its potentially devastating political consequences. Moreover, the documents also contain one reference to a Chinese official who inferred benign intentions from this risky behavior. In response to Kissinger's sharing of sensitive information about Soviet capabilities, Qiao Guanhua expressed his gratitude to the national security advisor, adding, "this is also an indication of your wish to improve our relationship. I will say no more on that."⁶¹

The question of why China refrained from trying to expose Nixon during the negotiation process is a secondary one. I am primarily concerned with how secret overtures can be used to credibly reveal benign intentions. Nevertheless, it is a relevant question to explore in this context. Chinese behavior might be overdetermined. It is clear that for the remainder of Nixon's first term in office the Chinese would have gained, strategically, very little from revealing Nixon's assurances unless embarrassing the president of what China thought of as the imperialist United States would have increased Mao's prestige in the eyes of communist revolutionary movements. The evidence does not reveal Mao's calculations, but the documents suggest that the Chinese leadership was similarly concerned about keeping the content of the negotiations secret for now, calculating that a strategic revelation of Nixon's assurances would not serve their interest at that point. Indeed, Mao, like Nixon, was also interested in keeping the content of the secret negotiations during Nixon's first term, leading Nixon to promise that "under no circumstances will we embarrass him or his government, by implications or otherwise, that those subjects were discussed."⁶²

⁶⁰ MemCon, 28 February 1972, 8:30–9:30 pm, NSA Collection, 9. The Chinese could have also potentially revealed the secret intelligence reports to the Soviets, thereby jeopardizing US-Soviet relations. The Chinese presumably recognized Kissinger's actions as a signal of good intentions partly because of their understanding that either the Soviets or the American public would not have approved such an action.

⁶¹ MemCon, 23 February 1972, 9:35 am–12:34 pm, NSA Collection, 20.

⁶² MemCon, 28 February 1972, 8:30–9:30 am, NSA Collection, 3.

Given Mao's strong standing at home, it seems unlikely that he could have suffered political costs from the Chinese public or the ruling elite had the content of the negotiations with Nixon been revealed. Nevertheless, Kissinger and Nixon did see Mao as taking a political risk by meeting with the American president. In a briefing to Nixon shortly before the trip, Kissinger notes, "... the mysterious events last fall and the alleged Lin Piao challenge underline the great gamble Mao and Chou have taken in dealing with us and inviting us. Thus they will need to show some immediate result for *their* domestic audience."⁶³ At the same time, Mao was worried about the reaction of international communist movements and third parties like Vietnam to the fact that he had struck a deal with the hawkish American president behind the back of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Mao and Zhou were clear in stating that the perceptions of China's allies were very pressing issues for them.⁶⁴ Thus, immediately after Zhou reassured Nixon that he would not reveal information about Taiwan, he emphasized the urgency that Nixon act on "Vietnam and the other countries of Indochina," as China had "an obligation to sympathize with them and support them."⁶⁵

Despite China's interests for secrecy, Nixon's pledge carried significant risk that should have been seen as costly for two reasons. First, the autonomous risk of leaks from third parties was a real one that could have significantly hurt Nixon as well as his chances of reelection if his overtures over Taiwan had been revealed during his first term. Indeed, Nixon and Kissinger were acutely aware of the possibility of leaks from inside and outside their own bureaucracy. Consequently, they allowed only a selected few to read the transcripts of the meetings between Nixon and Zhou and Mao. Even Secretary of State William Rogers was not permitted to read those transcripts that dealt with Taiwan. Kissinger went as far as to ask Zhou that in private meetings between Nixon and Mao, the United States would be allowed to use Chinese interpreters "in order to guarantee security." Although such an act would have given the Chinese control over the record of the conversations, Kissinger reasoned that he could not trust American interpreters

⁶³ Memo from Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon, "Your Encounter with the Chinese," 5 February 1972, 2, NSA Collection Negotiating U.S.-Chinese Rapprochement, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB70/>, emphasis in original. On the Lin Piao's incident, see, for example, Qiu Jin, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ Upon his return from a trip to Beijing in October 1972, Kissinger reported that "both sides ... recognize that domestic and international constraints demand a phased resolution of the outstanding issue." He added that Zhou now agreed not to require time deadlines as long as principles are established even if in a secret manner. He said that China could wait on issues such as Taiwan, while the more urgent matters were those concerning Korea and Indochina, because the "PRC can be less generous about its allies' interests than about its own." Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, 11 November 1972, "My October China Visit: Discussions of the Issues," NSA Collection, "Negotiating U.S.-Chinese Rapprochement," 14.

⁶⁵ MemCon, 28 February 1972, 8:30-9:30 am. NSA Collection: Nixon's Trip to China, 8 and 10. See also, MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 261.

not to talk to journalists.⁶⁶ Some might question whether Kissinger and Nixon acted out of paranoia, or whether they were right to be concerned about a risk of leaks, especially so soon after the publication of the Pentagon Papers. But it is clear that they both felt that the possibility of leaks constituted a real risk that could not be fully mitigated. Viewed in this manner, Nixon and Kissinger were taking a significant political risk that was beyond the control of either side.⁶⁷

Second, and more significant, Nixon and Kissinger's initiative was also risky because the Chinese would become less patient with them, and eventually could decide to reveal Nixon's assurances if he did not act on them during his second term as he promised he would. As Kissinger noted to Nixon, "... if we turn out to be flaccid, they [Zhou and Mao] get nothing in return for the price they pay in turning to us."⁶⁸ Further, Kissinger explained, "If the Chinese are willing to wait on the future, they must be content about the future Their major concern will be to judge whether we will keep our word, and be meticulous in implementation."⁶⁹ The timing and context of the revelation of the secret would be up to the Chinese, not Nixon. If they doubted Nixon's sincerity, the Chinese could have timed it, even during his second term, to coincide with events that would have hurt Nixon most. Thus, Nixon was putting the agenda into Chinese hands, thereby making his secret assurances more credible.

One might argue that anti-Chinese groups in the United States would be satisfied if the Chinese realized that Nixon made promises but never carried out his assurances on Taiwan. By implications, deceiving the Chinese would have been rewarded by Nixon's conservative domestic opposition. There are two reasons, however, to doubt that scenario. First, if Nixon was seen as successful at deceiving the Chinese, he would have still acquired a reputation for being a dishonest negotiator. This reputation could have impaired his own diplomacy and American foreign relations in the future. Second, as risk implies high variance in outcomes, it is also possible that anti-Chinese groups at home and the Republican right could have inferred from the negotiations that Nixon was willing to compromise the status of Taiwan in order to appease China. Such concerns indeed made Nixon's successor, President Gerald Ford, very reluctant about moving forward with normalization.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 211.

⁶⁷ Still, Kissinger and Nixon were confident that the Chinese leadership would try to keep the negotiations secret for the moment. MemCon, 22 February 1972, 2:10–6:10 pm. NSA Collection, 4; and MemCon, 26 February 1972, 9:20–10:05 am. NSA Collection, 8.

⁶⁸ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Your Encounter with the Chinese," 5 February 1972, 2. Yet the Chinese needed to show to their public that there was progress on the Taiwan issue and urged Nixon to clarify his position on Japan, and to make a public communiqué about Taiwan. MemCon, 24 February 1972, 5:15–8:05 pm. NSA Collection, 11.

⁶⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Your Encounter with the Chinese," 5 February 1972, 3.

⁷⁰ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 327; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis With China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 71–86; Robert Ross, *Negotiating*

We do not know the full extent of Nixon's assurances, but clearly Nixon faced some backlash from major conservative figures for his diplomacy toward China, who accused him of betraying an important and loyal ally, Taiwan.⁷¹

In sum, Kissinger and Nixon sought to reassure China that the United States was committed to forming strategic and enduring relations with the PRC, that it was not in US interests to use China as a way to get concessions from the Soviets, and that the United States was willing to take costly steps in the future to demonstrate its commitment and intentions. Admittedly, both Kissinger and Nixon had a penchant for doing things in secret as a way to circumvent domestic opposition and bureaucratic infighting. However, the evidence indicates that the rationale for secrecy in these initial phases of the negotiations with the Chinese also had an important strategic justification in this case. Backlash from both domestic audiences and international actors would have been severe had their assurances been revealed. Further, I have shown that the Chinese did draw important inferences about Nixon's intentions from the secret interaction, which in part had to do with their recognition that they could undermine him politically if his intentions turned out to be insincere. Finally, it was not in China's interest to reveal its dealings with Nixon during his first term. Viewed in this manner, the two sides were in a MAD-like situation facing an autonomous risk of leak from third parties. But the Chinese could have caused Nixon significant embarrassment by publicizing his pledge on Taiwan during his second term if he did not follow up on his commitment. Overall, Nixon put himself in a vulnerable position by handing the Chinese the ability to decide whether and when to reveal his secret overtures. Thus, the secret channel conveyed the credibility that Nixon was interested in cooperating with China.

The Israel-PLO Secret Peace Negotiations in Oslo (1993)

In late 1992, public negotiations in Washington between Israeli officials and Palestinian representatives had stalemated. It was in this context that two Israeli academics, Yair Hirshfeld and Ron Pundak, initiated secret talks in Oslo with members of the Fatah movement. Whereas the Washington channel involved local Palestinian representatives from the occupied territories, who were considered more moderate and pragmatic, the Oslo channel involved

Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969–1989 (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 80–81. According to Ross, conservative leaders criticized Ford for his China policy and threatened to back Ronald Reagan for the Republican nomination. Public opinion in 1973 was equally against abandoning Taiwan, as a Gallup poll reported that 70 percent of Americans opposed establishing diplomatic relations with China at the expense of US diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

⁷¹ Mann, *About Face*, 53–54; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China: An Investigative History* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 143–45.

members of PLO leadership in Tunis who belonged to the more radical faction of the PLO.

Under the guise of an extended seminar on regional development, this new secret track of negotiations would soon become “the most closely guarded secret of both Israelis and Palestinians.”⁷² During its initial phase, the Oslo channel was informal, and thus does not meet the criteria for secret reassurance described in this work.⁷³ At the time, contact between government officials in Israel and members of the PLO was considered a crime in Israel. During the 1992 elections, both the Likud and Labor parties pledged that there would be no governmental contacts with the PLO.⁷⁴

The informal nature of the talks was intended, according to the architect of this channel from the Israeli side, Knesset member Yossi Beilin, to allow deniability on Israel’s part while allowing for information to be gathered on PLO positions. Yet, knowing that Beilin had close ties to both Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and his Secretary of State Shimon Peres, the Palestinians assumed that the latter, at least, was informed about the talks and preferred to keep his knowledge secret. In his memoirs, Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen), who was the main architect of the accord from the Palestinian side and one of Arafat’s most senior advisors, confirms that this impression encouraged the PLO to maintain secrecy. He reasons “We were careful to maintain complete secrecy of these contacts so as not to embarrass the Israeli side which was mounting a crucial election campaign at the time. If news of these contacts had leaked to the media—Arab, Western or Israeli, it would have caused Labour to lose many of the seats it was seeking to form a government. Israeli parties watch each other’s every move and hunt for any mistakes which they would magnify and use to hurt each other’s prospects.”⁷⁵

The PLO leadership understood that the disclosure of the mere existence of such a channel could have grave implications for the Israeli officials involved. The PLO leadership chose not to reveal the information, it seems, because they believed at the time that the potential benefits of an agreement outweighed the benefits they would get from undermining the Israeli leadership. In other words, some in the PLO believed they had a “hostage”; but their interest was not to kill him for now. To be sure, the informal nature of the secret talks led the PLO leadership in Tunis to doubt the credibility of this channel and the intentions of its leadership, although they agreed “to

⁷² Yossi Beilin, *Touching Peace: From the Oslo Accord to a Final Agreement* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 62.

⁷³ According to Beilin, neither Shimon Peres nor Yitzhak Rabin knew about its existence. Beilin himself did not actively participate in the discussions.

⁷⁴ Makovsky, *Making Peace*, 20.

⁷⁵ Mahmoud (Abu Mazen) Abbas, *Through Secret Channels: The Road to Oslo* (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1995), 58.

accept for the moment our uncertainty over the official status of the Israeli negotiators, and the inherent weaknesses of such secret negotiations.”⁷⁶

Promising signs of progress made Rabin’s involvement essential. Peres and Beilin faced a serious dilemma of how to credibly signal their intentions to cooperate while maintaining deliberate ambiguity as to the status of the talks. Beilin writes, “We wondered how long we could maintain the framework that had been evolved without confirming that the track was known to Rabin and Peres or without sending an accredited official representative. Our function now would be to try to obtain changes in the documentation while convincing the Palestinians that the track was still a valid and worthwhile project.”⁷⁷ Several factors motivated Rabin to upgrade the Oslo talks in May 1993 and to appoint Uri Savir, the director-general of Israel’s Foreign Ministry, as the chief negotiator of the Israeli delegation in Oslo. First, the PLO threatened to terminate the Oslo backchannel as long as Israel maintained ambiguity regarding the status of the talks. Second, disillusionment with the official Washington channel led Rabin to confess to Denis Ross that “only Arafat could make a deal for the Palestinians because the Palestinians living in the territories were not willing to defy him.”⁷⁸ Yet, when Ross asked the Prime Minister what it would take for him to talk to Arafat, Rabin replied that “there was no way that he could talk to Arafat.” Ross suspected that Rabin was concerned about public opinion. After all, on countless occasions he had repeated that he would never talk to the PLO.⁷⁹

The upgrading of the talks proved to be a pivotal turning point in the negotiations. It not only made the track official, but also signaled to the Palestinians, according to Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala), that the Rabin government was committed to this backchannel even though it had remained highly secretive. The PLO understood that this move was politically risky for Rabin due to domestic opposition, as well as to his own legacy of referring to the PLO as a terrorist organization with which he would not negotiate (a point this paper will revisit shortly). Indeed, the mere existence of negotiations between Israel and the PLO bestowed at least a degree of recognition, if not legitimacy, on the PLO that future Israeli governments would not have been able to deny had the talks been revealed. Capturing this aspect, David Makovsky, who interviewed several members of the PLO delegation, writes “the change [in the status of the talks] also *gave the PLO significant tactical*

⁷⁶ Ahmed Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem: The Palestinian Story of the Secret Negotiations* (London, UK: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 71–72. Abu Mazen concurs, arguing that the PLO would not have suffered political costs had the secret talks been made prematurely public: “There were no risks in it for us. If the dialogue proved fruitful we would have achieved something we were after, and if it turned out to be just small talk with an academic this could not hurt us.” Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 114.

⁷⁷ Beilin, *Touching Peace*, 74.

⁷⁸ In April, the Palestinian delegation proclaimed a boycott of the Washington talks, in response to Israel’s expulsion of some four hundred fundamentalist Islamic activists. For quotation, see Makovsky, *Making Peace*, 41.

⁷⁹ Avi Shlaim, “The Oslo Accord,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 29.

leverage, in that they could threaten to disclose the negotiations publicly. Even if the talks later collapsed, Israel would no longer be able to dismiss the PLO as a terrorist organization beyond the pale of civilized discourse and deserving to be ostracized by the world community. Thus official negotiations made an Israeli decision to publicly recognize the PLO more a matter of “when” than “if.”⁸⁰

Abu Mazen was well aware of the hand-tying effect of this move and of its political ramifications. He notes in his memoirs that “[i]n political terms, secrecy implied mutual recognition, and was maintained to achieve tangible results that can then be made public. In effect, the Palestinian-Israeli contact at the decision-making level implied mutual recognition.”⁸¹

Despite these implications, Rabin became even more personally involved in the Oslo talks. He would exchange letters with Arafat in September 1993, signifying mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. He also would sign the second part of the Oslo Accords, called the Declaration of Principles, setting the agenda for negotiations on Palestinian self-government in the occupied territories. Both documents were the product of secret negotiations that were done with the knowledge of selected individuals within the Labor Party.

Now that an agreement had been reached, both parties had to face their domestic audiences. PLO members who participated in the secret channel had the task of convincing members of the Executive Committee and the Fatah Central Committee to accept the agreement. The latter had criticized both the substance of the agreement, as well as the manner in which it was achieved. As Abu Mazen recalls, “it was with tremendous difficulty that we managed to shift the conversation away from the secrecy aspect to the subject of the accord.” Eventually, he writes, “the great majority of the members of both Committees approved the terms of the accord, having been convinced that what we had achieved could not have been possible except through this channel.”⁸² As for Israel, on 30 August, Rabin and Peres presented the accord to the Israeli cabinet for approval. Notwithstanding the concerns voiced by some members of the Labor Party, the entire cabinet, save two abstentions, voted in favor of the accords.

Rabin’s ability to convince his cabinet to endorse the agreement he had reached without their knowledge or consent, indicates that as far as some Israeli decision makers were concerned, the Oslo agreements outweighed the costs of engaging in secret talks. However, the prospects of opposition from other domestic audiences were significant. These concerns contributed greatly to Rabin’s reluctance to initially endorse secret negotiations with the PLO. Later, he hesitated to become personally involved in such talks due to

⁸⁰ Makovsky, *Making Peace*, 46, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 58–59.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 206.

similar apprehensions. Rabin's coalition was a narrow one, resting on a slim majority of 61 members (out of 120 members of the Knesset in total). Support within this coalition for an agreement with the PLO was highly doubtful.⁸³ Rabin's concerns were seemingly justified: when the Knesset voted on the accord in September 1993, only 61 members of the Knesset voted for it, including 5 Arab members on whom Rabin was reluctant to rely in matters pertaining to Israel's national security.

Uncertain of how his coalition would vote on an agreement with the PLO, public legitimacy for his foreign policy initiative became all the more crucial. Israeli public opinion on negotiating with the PLO appears to have transitioned during the period of the Oslo process; however, in no time during this period did opinion polls show significant public support for making peace with the PLO. According to Asher Arian, 29 percent were in favor in 1991, and 52 percent in 1993. Similarly, when asked "if the PLO undergoes basic changes and announces that it recognizes the state of Israel and will completely give up acts of terror," approval rates shifted from 16 percent in 1991 to 51 percent in 1993. Israeli public preferences appear to have changed once Rabin presented the Israeli public with a negotiated agreement. Thus, in 1994, public approval for negotiations with the PLO rose to 60 percent, indicating that public preferences after exposure to an outcome can, and do, change.⁸⁴ Peres attributed the support for the agreement to the element of surprise, noting that "sometimes . . . what comes by surprise generates much less opposition than what was expected."⁸⁵ On the Palestinian side, Abu Alaa agrees that "secrecy was a precondition for the eventual success of the negotiations. Both sides realized this fact from the beginning. Opponents of the talks on both sides would otherwise have been in a position to undermine them at any stage."⁸⁶ Two years after the official signing ceremony of the Oslo I Accords, Rabin paid the ultimate price for taking such a path. In November 1995, a right-wing religious Israeli Jew, who opposed his peace initiative and the Oslo Accords, assassinated Rabin.

In sum, the negotiations between Israel and the PLO were not just about reaching a limited agreement over territories. Rather, the working premise was that a partnership between the distrustful sides had to be fostered in order for any agreement to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of domestic audiences. Secret negotiations were thus necessary from a signaling perspective to allow both sides to reach a level of trustworthiness so that a negotiated and satisfactory agreement on more challenging issues, such as the future of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinians to Israel, could be reached

⁸³ This was especially due to uncertainty regarding how the religious party Shas would vote.

⁸⁴ Asher Arian, *Security Threatened: Surveying Israeli Opinion on Peace and War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸⁵ Quoted in Ben Mor, "Peace Initiatives and Public Opinion: The Domestic Context of Conflict Resolution," *Journal of Peace Research* 34, no. 2 (May 1997): 210.

⁸⁶ Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem*, 296.

later on. To get there, Rabin had to demonstrate to Arafat that he was committed to cooperation with the leadership of the PLO whom he had previously denounced, and that Israel was willing to return territories in exchange for recognition and security. As long as the process was not official, the PLO viewed it largely as a costless signal of intentions. Soon enough, however, the PLO needed the Rabin government to signal its commitment to the peace talks. Upgrading the secret talks to an official level provided a costly signal because the punishment for potential revelation was now much higher for Rabin. Viewed in this manner, Rabin's decision essentially transformed the Oslo talks into what I consider in this article as "secret reassurance." To be sure, Rabin understood the risk he was taking by upgrading the secret talks. This was part of the reason why he had been reluctant to do so for so long. He was further aware of the strong Knesset and public opposition to negotiating with the PLO and that he was reversing his public commitment not to make peace with a terrorist organization. Moreover, aware of the political implications that the disclosure of these talks would have had for the fate of the Rabin government, the PLO seemed to infer Rabin's trustworthiness or willingness to cooperate. These assessments of Rabin's intentions, the evidence suggests, constituted one of the main reasons why the PLO never chose to strategically reveal the existence of the secret talks and the nature of the Israeli concessions during the negotiation process.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The logic of secret reassurance permits a more flexible approach to signaling one's foreign policy intentions toward an adversary than the current literature on signaling has suggested is possible. Building on the logic of a two-level game, this paper has shown that the secret reassurance approach is a way by which leaders can manipulate domestic and international constraints, and credibly communicate their foreign policy intentions. This channel that uses secret reassurances also allows leaders to be more frank with their adversaries than with their own domestic audiences. The implications are also ironic: leaders may be able to break out of the security dilemma by pursuing a secretive signaling strategy and may effectively reach agreements not in spite of, but because of, the opposition of domestic audiences. Normative tension does exist between secrecy and democratic ideals, but the ability to make use of secret assurances to achieve better international outcomes—which may have countervailing normative value—is available only to leaders who are thought to be accountable to domestic opponents.⁸⁷

Notwithstanding the benefits secrecy might provide, secret reassurance is a risky strategy and its limitations should be clear. Leaders need to think

⁸⁷ I thank a reviewer for helping make this point clear.

long and hard about the potential adverse effects of this method of signaling. The recent WikiLeaks episode should awaken leaders to the fact that third parties beyond their control can not only jeopardize their diplomatic efforts, but can also inflict serious political costs on them. After all, under various conditions, secrecy may allow leaders to conveniently deceive their adversary. Indeed, as this article highlights, from a rational perspective, secret reassurance should be perceived as a genuinely credible mode of gauging the other's intentions in cooperation only under a limited and narrow set of circumstances. Calculating the costs and benefits initiators face from suckering an adversary, or levels of domestic opposition are, under most circumstances, extremely challenging tasks. As the Iran Gate episode reminds us, leaders often underestimate the adversary's ability to deceive and reveal, even under situations in which the conditions of credibility are not met.

Finally, the cases presented here deal with democratic initiators. One may wonder whether an initiator's regime type matters for the secret reassurance logic to work.⁸⁸ Just as Jessica Weeks shows that audience cost mechanisms can help signal resolve in certain authoritarian regimes, the theory about secret reassurance should be applicable to most cases of nondemocratic initiators. In general, a nondemocratic leader's efforts to initiate secret reassurance should be perceived as credible in this theory when he pursues a foreign policy that runs contrary to the preferences of the ruling elite in his own country, and as long as that elite has the means and incentives to punish the nondemocratic leader if his reassurance efforts are exposed prematurely.⁸⁹ The serious consequences of losing power in authoritarian regimes can have the effect of enhancing the credibility of reassurance from the perspective of the adversary. Nevertheless, further research should examine the degree to which domestic audiences can effectively coordinate to sanction leaders who conclude unpopular secret agreements across different kinds of nondemocratic regimes.

⁸⁸ Hein Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs"; Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*.

⁸⁹ It should be emphasized that domestic opposition in democracies or nondemocracies might be a sufficient condition to gain credibility. However, it might not be a necessary condition that renders all other types of private assurances not credible. Indeed, as explained in this paper, there are several reasons for why leaders choose secret over public channels, and in some scenarios, domestic opposition might not enhance credibility at all.