

## **Places for Identification in the Blame Game: An Exploration of Rhetorical Diplomacy in a U.S.–China Twitter Clash**

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This article explores the concept of rhetorical diplomacy in understanding public diplomacy on Twitter. Recent years have witnessed the growing importance of Twitter in the field. In 2020, with its uncertainties, the United States and China plunged into diplomatic clashes and blame-shifting on the social media platform as they fought over the hearts and minds of global publics. In this article, we define rhetorical diplomacy as state leaders' and diplomats' attempts to influence global publics, manage change, and cultivate legitimacy. We use Burkean identification as the guiding concept as we focus on the U.S.–China Twitter clash and analyze 495 tweets from American and Chinese top diplomats. The results indicate that they employ a wide array of identification strategies, which often appear simultaneously in combinations of common ground and antithetical strategies. Twitter also seems to offer a platform for more ambiguous identification through an assumed "we" or "we as the world."

*Keywords: rhetorical diplomacy, public diplomacy, identification, social media, Twitter*

In 2020, the world found itself in a drastically new situation. The rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the dramatic alteration of our lives. The pandemic did not arrive into a vacuum, but into a tense and increasingly contested global space, where Great Power competition between the United States and China was already on the ascent. In this respect, the pandemic presented the main actors with a difficult situation in which the imperative for global coordination and cooperation was contrasted with growing tensions. Thus, as state leaders were forced to focus more on domestic affairs, the need to deal with foreign policy issues remained in place. Moreover, the pandemic seemed to set the stage for the race concerning the postpandemic world order. The world faced this new rising challenge in a digital diplomacy environment prone to the use of an offensive tone (e.g., Ott, 2017).

In this article, we examine one of the main forums for this digital contestation, Twitter. We present a theoretical framework for rhetorical diplomacy and analyze empirical evidence focusing on American and

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Date submitted: 2021-04-16

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Chinese top leaders' tweets during 2020. Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, Twitter had already emerged as the public diplomacy channel of choice for many world leaders (Twiplomacy, 2018). In fact, the year 2019 was marked by the intensifying presence of Chinese diplomatic actors on Twitter (Feng, 2019). Although blocked domestically, it seems clear that China has sought to harness this new influential platform for its diplomatic communication globally. This effort began soon after a trade war between China and the United States was initiated by President Donald Trump—and only a moment before the COVID-19 outbreak emerged in Wuhan. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China established its official Twitter account in October 2019, urging users, "Follow us to know more about China's Diplomacy" (MFA China, n.d.).

Thus, Twitter was a potential platform for the communicative clash between the United States and China, the world's largest powers. We ask the following research question:

*RQ1: How does rhetorical identification function to influence the persuasiveness of rhetorical diplomacy?*

Our theoretical framework draws from Kenneth Burke's (1969) theory of identification and the theory of rhetorical presidency (Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, & Bessette, 1981; Tulis, 1987), from which the concept of rhetorical diplomacy is derived. Rhetorical presidency refers to the tendency and necessity of democratically elected presidents to directly address mass publics to gain popular support (Ceaser et al., 1981). The concept of rhetorical diplomacy is a continuation of this idea into the realm of foreign affairs, in which influencing public discourse and shaping the opinions of and cultivating relationships with foreign publics are important public diplomacy objectives (Cull, 2009; Gilboa, 2008; Sevin, 2017). Thus, we operate at the intersection of the rhetorical tradition of human communication research and the constructivist view of international relations (IR). Regarding communication research within the rhetorical tradition, communication is treated as artful public address, and the research focuses on the use of symbols as a means of persuasion. Regarding IR research, theorists holding a constructivist view believe that identities—and, by extension, IR—are constructed in the process of social interaction (Onuf, 2013; Wendt, 1999).

Having established this, we should not exaggerate the intersubjective dimensions of the process. We are not claiming that a process of rhetorical diplomacy will necessarily result in common identities. On the contrary, we envisage rhetorical diplomacy as a site of communicative action (Risse, 2000) where actors can put forward competing claims and contrasting frames concerning the social reality. As Krebs and Jackson (2007) explain, in rhetorical contestation, one argument does not necessarily beat another simply because of its better validity, but because of its social sustainability, as the audience deems its rhetorical deployment more acceptable. Twitter has massive potential for information dissemination, but its potential for the utilization of complex rhetorical plays remains unclear. Our intention is to increase the understanding of rhetorical perspectives—more specifically, of rhetorical identification. In this article, identification does not refer to identity building, identity assigning, or identity work in general—though they are significant practices and motifs regarding diplomacy. Here, identification as a concept introduced by Burke (1969) refers to various rhetorical means. Burke (1969) theorizes identification as the key term of rhetoric—and as a precondition to persuasion—arguing that one can "persuade [the other] only insofar as [one] can talk [the other's] language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* [one's] ways with [the other's]" (p. 55).

We now proceed to discuss these theoretical foundations, which are then applied to rhetorical analysis of the U.S.–China blame game on Twitter. Thus, given that the use of social media has become an everyday diplomatic activity—a development that probably only intensified because of the pandemic—we examine rhetorical diplomacy’s theoretical and empirical implications. Specifically, we focus on top-level foreign policy messaging as we analyze 495 tweets sent from three American and three Chinese accounts to uncover how identification serves as a rhetorical means of public diplomacy on Twitter.

### **Mediated Public Diplomacy and Rhetorical Diplomacy in the Age of Twitter**

Diplomacy, as a form of communication between nations, has a long history. Sending and receiving messages, providing and gathering information, and establishing and maintaining relationships have been its core practices even before the era of states (Nicolson, 1942). Recently, public diplomacy has received much attention as nations have realized the importance of the public, both domestic and foreign. Henrikson (2006) argues that public diplomacy is not to be separated from diplomacy as an institution, but must be seen as an integral part of its processes. The key here is that diplomacy’s basic function is to achieve foreign policy objectives by influencing foreign governments; the only difference is that in public diplomacy, the influencing takes place indirectly (Henrikson, 2006).

If diplomacy is defined as the management of change in international society (Melissen, 2005), then it is also necessary to note that diplomacy is, for the diplomatic actors, also about the management of legitimacy (Clark, 2007). Kiesling (2006) suggests that the basis for legitimacy can be located in the personal relationships between state leaders and in the way these relationships are communicated to foreign publics. This concerns not only the top leaders, but also any public diplomacy practitioner, because they have a stake in many different—and often complex—forms of transnational relations as countries strive to win others to their side and find “permanent friends” (Melissen, 2005). A basic assumption of public diplomacy is that public opinion—usually affiliated with both domestic and international audience costs (Fearon, 1994; Wood, 2012)—is the currency used in complex foreign policy games. The renowned social psychologist and game theorist Anatol Rapoport (1970) highlights the importance of communication, especially in bargaining situations—for instance, in “the pregame jockeying, in which coalitions are formed” (p. 232). He also criticizes basic game theory for its lack of “a rigorous analysis of situations where communicative acts are moves of the game, *and where effective communication may change the game*” (Rapoport, 1970, p. 232; emphasis in original).

Rhetorical moves are important in the credibility battle (Mor, 2007), and they can often be the defining parts of any situation in which a change in world order is present. Goddard (2018) suggests that rising powers recognize the need to clarify their aims and interests because their adversaries are unsure of them. Accordingly, powers that can portray their ambitions as legitimate are likely to face accommodation, whereas those considered revolutionary are likely to face containment and confrontation (Goddard, 2018). Crucially, foreign policy leaders can promote and even create crises with rhetoric (Bostdorff, 1994). In addition, as Young (2014) emphasizes,

Rhetoric that appears to do one thing in fact can be operating at a much deeper level at the same time . . . [and] in advocating *for* something, the rhetor may be setting up dichotomies by exclusion that will become salient later on. (p. 194)

Scrutinizing world leaders' social media rhetoric is important simply because of the worldwide masses of people whose thoughts, sentiments, and actions are potentially affected, either directly or indirectly, through traditional media. For this purpose, we propose a framework of rhetorical diplomacy. It is a parallel concept to mediated public diplomacy, which Entman (2008) defines as "the organized attempts by a president and [the president's] foreign policy apparatus to exert as much control as possible over the framing of U.S. policy in foreign media" (p. 89). Framing means selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames guide the receivers' thinking as they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). According to Lakoff (2010), the ultimate question is which frames are activated.

Entman's U.S.-centric conceptualization of mediated public diplomacy has been further developed by Golan, Manor, and Arceneaux (2019), who define it more broadly as "the organized attempts by governments to influence foreign public opinion via mediated channels including paid, earned, owned and shared media for the purpose of gaining support for its foreign policy objectives" (p. 1670). However, it is worth noting that public diplomacy is not only about influencing public opinion but also about influencing public debate and managing relationships (see Sevin, 2017). Fiott (2015) provides a conceivable outlook on the issue, as he separates rhetorical diplomacy from two other forms of diplomatic conduct, *legislative diplomacy* (the conduct of foreign policy through institutional and legislative mechanisms) and *active diplomacy* (foreign missions and other active involvement with other countries). He defines *rhetorical diplomacy* as "any action with an international dimension that involves debate and dialogue" (Fiott, 2015, p. 4).

Our conception of rhetorical diplomacy is derived from the concept of *rhetorical presidency*, a term first coined by Ceaser et al. (1981). The core idea of rhetorical presidency was the observation that popular or mass rhetoric had become a principal tool for U.S. presidents in attempting to govern the nation by appealing directly to the people (Tulis, 1987). According to Tulis (1987), this mode of operation may even be considered compulsory for presidents as they seek to defend themselves and their objectives publicly and effect change in public opinion. Ceaser and colleagues (1981) traced the rise of rhetorical presidency to three factors: the development of communication technology and mass media, modern presidential campaigns, and the modern doctrine of presidential leadership. More recently, Stuckey (2010) has highlighted the changes that have come with the Internet age: Presidential speech is now more accessible, audiences are increasingly narrow and differentiated, rhetorical processes are accelerated, ethos has become central, and, probably most strikingly, we can now "all participate in the creation of presidential speeches" (p. 46). Scacco and Coe (2016) go even further, suggesting that there has been a transition from rhetorical to a more ubiquitous presidency, as the president has traded "partial messaging control for more interactive, transactional messaging" (p. 2032). Consequently, social media are now an inseparable part of rhetorical presidency. While presidential speech has taken over the Twittersphere, diplomatic speech has done so as well, with the platform becoming the social media channel of choice for political leaders and governments globally (Twiplomacy, 2018).

Accordingly, we define rhetorical diplomacy as state leaders' and diplomats' attempts to influence global and foreign publics, to manage change, and to cultivate legitimacy for political actors and projects. Indeed, rhetorical diplomacy is needed in states' pursuit of an honest, reliable, and capable image in the eyes of the many publics. Thus, state leaders are inclined, or at times even compelled, to use their voice and communicate their countries' identities and interests to foreign publics. In fact, leaders' images are increasingly shaping their home countries' images (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2014; Ingenhoff & Klein, 2018).

Although our focus is on Twitter, we underline that our approach differs from mediated public diplomacy because it puts less emphasis on the attributes of the medium and more emphasis on the means and agents of persuasion. The rhetorical diplomacy approach broadens the analytical framework to encompass questions such as how vocabularies are established, how basic relational aspects are shaped, and how meanings are formed in public diplomatic discourse. In this sense, rhetorical diplomacy relates to the strategic narratives framework (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014) because it focuses on persuasive matters instead of soft power resources.

Nevertheless, some contextual clarifications are necessary. Diplomatic communication has indeed faced a new situation, with the dialogic and participatory affordances of Twitter, along with the increasing emphasis on engagement. However, there are two sides to this issue, and Twitter should certainly be perceived as both a one-way and a two-way medium. Moreover, Cowan and Arsenault (2008) argue that while two-way communication is emphasized in public diplomacy, it may never fully replace the one-way mode of public address. They also assert that these two modes are complementary and that monologic communication is important when nations want to convey their identities and interests to others.

We further highlight that rhetorical diplomacy operates in a challenging and tense environment. First, countries face credibility issues when their public diplomacy does not appear to be in line with their foreign policy. Character and credibility issues have become central in a rhetorical environment enhanced by technological development, and suspicions about them negatively affect the trustworthiness of communication. Second, tensions exist between domestic and international levels of public discourse. Disparities may arise from various situational aspects, such as elections or summits, but also from public expectations. For instance, Cooper (2019) highlights that in their efforts to stigmatize the traditional establishment, populist leaders complicate diplomatic engagement with foreign publics.

Third, and probably the issue with the most practical significance, there is the tension concerning the properties of the medium. Twitter differs from earlier public diplomacy channels in many ways, most notably in that it requires simplification, and it seems to promote impulsive behavior and generate impoliteness (Ott, 2017). The question of whether this is caused by users or the channel itself is debatable, but President Trump clearly led by example as the bird of ill behavior. Whether his tweeting is seen as right-wing populist (Kreis, 2017), as a booster of rhetorical incivility (Zompetti, 2019), or as the building blocks of a presidential archive of lies (McGranahan, 2019), it has become clear that such speech is far from constructive. Ott (2017) suggests that the danger lying behind offensive tweeting in tandem with affectively charged publics is the tendency to "not foster reasoned public deliberation among people of diverse backgrounds and experiences," but to "produce a uniformed [sic], uncritical, and irresponsible electorate" (p. 65)—a vision that tragically came true in early 2021 at the U.S. Capitol.

Regardless of whether they are products of one's impulsive thinking in a flashing moment or rigorously tailored tools produced by a workgroup in a series of meetings, tweets are strategic messages produced to accomplish certain goals. Tweets are rhetorical artifacts that political and diplomatic leaders use to build their strategic narratives (see Roselle et al., 2014) and gain public support. To increase understanding of rhetorical diplomacy on Twitter, we now turn to identification as a guiding concept.

### **The Concept of Rhetorical Identification**

In the Burkean understanding of rhetoric, *identification* is a key term. Burke (1969) claims that identification—not replacing, but preceding persuasion—is the principal feature of rhetoric. Persuasion can only take place when the persuadee identifies with the persuader (Burke, 1969). Importantly, identification is needed because people are separated from each other, or, as Burke (1969) puts it, “to confront the implications of division” (p. 22). He explains,

Identification is compensatory to division. If [humans] were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If [humans] were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of [the human's] very essence. (Burke, 1969, p. 22)

From the perspective of set theory, identification can happen if two sets share at least some elements. The existence of shared elements may be real, or one may believe in their existence (Rosenfeld, 1969). In turn, “identification would not exist if there were no shared elements or if it were believed there were no shared elements” (Rosenfeld, 1969, pp. 182–183). Remarkably, this notion shows how two sets—be they persons, groups, or anything else—can become consubstantial, in Burke's terms, simply because the persuadee thinks that they are. Importantly, if the persuadee thinks that there is no alignment at all between her or him and the persuader, identification cannot happen.

Some aspects of rhetoric may also lead away from identification. For instance, Harte (1977) labels some of Eric Hoffer's thoughts on mass movements as “disidentification.” Harte (1977) stresses that while Burke treats identification with a positive emphasis, considering it as favorable to a persuader, Hoffer highlights its negative side. Hoffer (1951) saw existing group ties as restrictions to identification with emerging mass movements, an idea Harte (1977) thought of as strengthening the insight that “while certain identifications are favorable to a mass movement, others may stand in the way of persuasion” (p. 67). Then, in terms of set theory, some elements make identification impossible or, more accurately, repel it, causing disidentification.

It must be stressed that Hoffer's ideas move past rhetoric as persuasion to encompass a wider realm of identities and group identities. As stated earlier, identities are not the subject of this study. Nevertheless, the workings of identification are not limited to persuasion, but they can contribute to identity formation (Quesinberry, 2005). Take, for instance, McCartney's (2019) remarks on how foreign policy shapes national identity, especially in a reactive way through the national interpretation of and response to international events and conditions. Hence, audience reactions may have significant cumulative effects on identity formation. However, interpretations of single tweets do not translate into formulations of national

identities in a straightforward manner. Twitter interactions operate on the microlevel of identity formation, and their effects are only cumulative for the whole. Single tweets, then, cannot change the world, but they can contribute to the process of change by providing basic building blocks for the formulation of meanings, identities, and opinions. Political and diplomatic leaders tweet their interpretations of different situations and issues to both domestic and international audiences and foreign policy elites, who then form new interpretations in the same way as in the ubiquitous presidency (see Scacco & Coe, 2016). Here, mediated public diplomacy and rhetorical diplomacy complement each other; the former deals with broader processes, while the latter focuses on symbolic matters.

While Twitter communication, including presidential and diplomatic speech, has been the topic of some academic rhetorical analysis, closer inspection of rhetorical identification in social media has been scarce. Moreover, when identification has been a topic of research, it has primarily been problematized as a function of identity work, not necessarily as a means of persuasion. Cheney's (1983) observations of organizational communication provide a useful framework to understand identification; he summarizes its three basic strategies: common ground (emphasizing shared values, goals, and identities), antithesis (uniting against a common enemy), and the assumed or transcendent "we." The third strategy is both subtle and powerful because it often goes unnoticed, presenting commonality as taken for granted (Cheney, 1983). Cheney (1983) concludes that "strategies often appear in concert, creating especially potent statements about the relationship of the individual to the organization" (pp. 155–156). For instance, Head (2016) found that Facebook users draw on various identification strategies—including common ground, antithesis, and the assumed "we"—in their posts as they try to identify with an audience.

Regarding Twitter diplomacy, Duncombe (2017) suggests that such communication can potentially bring diplomatic counterparts together when other communicative possibilities are limited. In terms of identification, her observation of the fledging *détente* of U.S.–Iran relations is a perfect example of how rhetors seek common ground. In that instance, it was pursued through emphasizing mutual respect and the equivalent significance of national interests. In addition to these ideational sources, identification can also arise from material and formal sources (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). For instance, Carpenter (1972) suggests that stylistic identifications occur when the receiver can predict what comes next in the discourse.

Burke's theory has been criticized for its indefinite remarks on the material aspects of rhetoric (see Engnell, 1998). In addition to a comprehensive review of this criticism, Engnell (1998) provides a useful conceptualization of rhetoric regarding this study:

The dominant tendency within contemporary rhetorical theory has been to identify rhetoric with the symbolic. . . . It may be, however, that rhetoric should best be viewed as a mediatory art that synthesizes the symbolic and the material. Its chief end is the successful management of the tensions implicit in these rival sources of motivation.  
(p. 21)

This conceptualization of rhetoric captures well the realm of rhetorical diplomacy, because it comprises both material and symbolic aspirations. Diplomacy as the management of change and legitimacy relies on both material and nonmaterial sources of power.

As a material, affective, and relational platform, Twitter is an embodiment of the Burkean parlor, a place for “an unending conversation” where discussions have begun long before one enters and progress even as one departs (Burke, 1941). Burbules (2002) has theorized the Web as a rhetorical place where “users come to find and make meanings, individually and collectively” (p. 78). To clarify, our intention in this study is to explore not rhetorical places, but the places within rhetoric where identification may occur and meanings can be found. Thus, in our exploration of rhetorical diplomacy we are following Burke’s (1969) advice: “Often we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address, but as a general *body of identifications* that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reënforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (p. 26; emphasis in original). Through these larger bodies of identifications, smaller bits and pieces come to have meaning.

### **Case Study: The U.S.–China Blame Game on Twitter**

#### ***Method and Data Collection***

In this article, we carry out a qualitative analysis of the identification strategies used by American and Chinese foreign policy leaders in their tweeting. We apply the method of rhetorical criticism because it enables the assessment of how tweeting performs “two principal functions of rhetoric: building community and inspiring people to achieve collective goals” (Zarefsky, 2008, p. 638). Our purpose is to answer the question of how rhetorical identification functions to influence the persuasiveness of rhetorical diplomacy. As Hatzisavvidou (2020) argues, the power of rhetorical analysis lies in its ability to “illuminate the terms of a dominant political project, how its agents seek to maintain or reinforce their power, [and] how aspiring agents of change seek to challenge sedimented views and insert alternative ones in the uncertain terrain of politics” (p. 5). Although our aim is not to analyze the political projects of China or the United States, we argue that this is the background against which the American and Chinese leaders crafted their rhetorical diplomacy in 2020. For both, there was a need for global legitimacy in an increasingly uncertain international situation.

In rhetorical criticism, the researcher engages in the systematic analysis of messages to understand how they work and how they persuade us. Thus, in our theoretically informed analysis, we evaluate American and Chinese top-level foreign policy tweeting to detect potential places for rhetorical identification within the framework of three strategies—common ground, antithesis, and the assumed “we” (see Cheney, 1983). We consider Cheney’s (1983) analytical framework as a suitable critical lens because it comprehensively captures the essence of identification theorized by Burke (1969).

We chose six Chinese and American top diplomats’ Twitter accounts for examination. President Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (@SecPompeo, his official account instead of the more personal @mikepompeo), and State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus (@statedeptspox) represent the United States. Because China’s president and paramount leader Xi Jinping does not have an official Twitter account, China is represented by three accounts: the Chinese MFA (@MFA\_China) and its spokespersons Hua Chunying, Geng Shuang, and Zhao Lijian (a shared account, @SpokespersonCHN, and Zhao’s official account, @zlj517). These accounts represent the government officials we consider the key players in conveying their countries’ diplomatic positions. In fact, all of them,



apart from @realDonaldTrump, were labeled as either China or U.S. government accounts by Twitter in early August 2020 (see Twitter, 2020).

Data collection and subsequent rhetorical analysis were carried out by the first author and discussed with the others. First, all 4,766 native tweets sent by the chosen users between March 1 and July 30, 2020, were collected using GetOldTweets3 Python library (see Henrique, 2016; Mottl, 2018). For practical reasons, three separate series of tweets were selected for closer analysis. Each series was associated with a 14-day frame around an event of great international relevance: (I) March 14–27, 2020 (when the G7 leaders' effort for a joint statement on COVID-19 failed because the American attempt to name the virus the "Wuhan virus" received no support from other nations); (II) May 19 to June 1, 2020 (when the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China assembled and passed its decision on the Hong Kong security legislation); and (III) July 16–29, 2020 (when the consulates in Houston and Chengdu were closed). Cases represent different types of international interactions: The first concerns international cooperation, the second concerns an internationally significant domestic event, and the third concerns a bilateral disagreement with concrete consequences.

In the final phase, tweets sent during each period were read closely by the first author. Tweets that were directly related to the issues between these two countries (e.g., statements on the other) were selected for closer analysis. Additionally, more ambiguous tweets were included as well, even if they did not address a specific context or purpose. Actually, tweets such as, "The world is at war with a hidden enemy. WE WILL WIN!" (Trump, 2020a) and the partial Hemingway quote, "What does not kill us makes us stronger, and we are stronger in the broken places" (MFA China, 2020a) are textbook examples of workings of identification within rhetorical artifacts. They both exemplify the assumed "we" strategy. They also include notions of a common enemy. Here, COVID-19 is the most likely to blame, but the enemy is not actually identified. In addition, during the second period, Chinese accounts published many tweet threads that were included in the data because of their interconnectedness.

In sum, the selection process resulted in three series of tweets: March 14–27 (102 tweets), May 19–June 1 (271 tweets), and July 16–29 (122 tweets). Thereby, three conversations between the United States and China were reconstructed. They are artificial, given that they did not occur as such and could not be comprehended as real interactions. Nonetheless, they are not imaginary in their essence; every single utterance did take place.

The analysis focuses solely on the tweet texts; the pictures, videos, and hyperlinks were not analyzed. The analytical method can be described as conceptually oriented criticism. It differs from methodologically driven criticism—in which the critic applies a general method to a specific case and deductively draws conclusions—because it is an abductive process that "proceeds through the constant interaction of careful reading and rigorous conceptual reflection" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 256). Our aim is not to take sides or to separate truth from falsity, but to investigate tweets as rhetorical artifacts regarding potential places of common-ground, antithetical, and assumed "we" identifications. These places are mapped in the following sections. The final section presents some concluding remarks and a brief discussion on the limitations of rhetorical criticism.

### ***Period I: Blaming by Naming***

While our emphasis is on identifications related to the rhetorical clash between the United States and China, the obvious place for antithetical identification in the March 2020 tweets concerned COVID-19 as the common enemy. On March 13, President Trump responded to the COVID-19 outbreak by declaring a national emergency. The pandemic was clearly portrayed as the common enemy that should be fought against on both the national and international levels.

Later that month, the G7 Foreign Ministers failed to reach a joint statement, principally because of disagreement over the naming of the virus. The United States pushed for labeling it the "Wuhan virus" because of its presumed Chinese origin. Indeed, this was a common antithetical strategy used by the United States to present China as the enemy. However, its utilization was crafty. Typically, China was not the main topic of tweets containing the words "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus," but such tweets still carried negative connotations attached to China. For instance, President Trump did not outright portray China negatively; instead, China was carried along as a potential place for antithetical identification. Others more directly accused the other country of misbehavior. It is noteworthy that in many cases, the blame was put on the government, not on people:

4/6 Many in the U.S. opposed the use of "Chinese virus", saying that it is bald-faced racism & xenophobia, & it will expose certain people under the risk of racism & violence. The challenge of #COVID19 needs to be tackled with joint efforts, instead of fear-mongering. (Zhao, 2020a)

This tweet by Zhao Lijian exemplifies China's effort to generate common-ground identification within the public, while presenting the American leaders' behavior as undesirable. Similarly, in her response to @SpokespersonCHN, Morgan Ortagus accused Chinese politicians of malpractice: "Propaganda outlets that report to the Chinese Communist Party are foreign agents, not 'journalists.' Even General Secretary Xi says they 'must speak for the Party'" (Ortagus, 2020a).

Indeed, while the blame game was built around framing the other power as unfavorable, the strategic use of antithesis was often complemented by other identification strategies. In many tweets, common ground (e.g., advocating values such as justice or international cooperation) was established along with naming a common enemy. For instance, on March 21, SpokespersonCHN (2020a) replied to Ortagus: "Lying and slander won't make the US great, nor will it make up for the lost time. Facing the global pandemic, the right thing to do is put public health ahead of politics. @statedeptspox." While this tweet expressed a theme of "public health ahead of politics" (SpokespersonCHN, 2020a), it also portrayed the U.S. actions as being contrary to this. Other prominent themes in Chinese tweets during March 2020 concerned the importance of cooperation and transparency. Similarly, these common-ground themes were also presented in conjunction with blaming the United States or its government.

Although the assumed "we" was also involved in such combinations of identification strategies, it was used much less. Interestingly, President Trump was its most frequent user: "The world is at war with a hidden enemy. WE WILL WIN!" (Trump, 2020a). He also tweeted, "We are going to WIN, sooner rather than

later!" (Trump, 2020b). Such statements demonstrate the impressive power of rhetoric. Trump builds a place for identification through the assumed "we" and "we as the world"—a place among the winners—while he leaves open the questions of what the war is about and who the enemy is. It is perhaps not surprising that these two tweets were among the three most liked tweets in the data. Combining the assumed "we" identification ("the world") with an ambiguous antithetical identification ("is at war with a hidden enemy") is a powerful rhetorical strategy. These tweets pave the way for identification while leaving substantive matters unexplained. What is also noteworthy is that the Chinese officials in particular seemed to avoid mentioning any person by name, which can be seen either as diplomatic behavior or as a more obscured identification strategy. Overall, "blame shift-tweeting" during March exemplifies the small nuances in the use of identification strategies that may at first seem irrelevant, but are in fact very meaningful.

### ***Period II: The Long Monologue***

In May 2020, the blame game took a new turn as Hong Kong and Taiwan became central topics. Most of the 271 tweets under inspection here were Chinese, posted sequentially during the annual meeting of the National People's Congress. Not all of them concerned the United States; their objective clearly was to spell out China's foreign policy agenda in general. However, they form an interesting body of digital rhetoric comparable to more traditional political speech that consists of statement after statement with supporting evidence and argumentation.

Several themes were covered in these tweet bursts. Regarding common-ground identification, the main themes presented to the audience were: "public health before politics," "international cooperation," "inviolability of sovereignty," "respect for facts," and "China as transparent and self-reliant." These value issues offer a wide range of places for identification. Mostly, clearly pronounced antithetical strategies were missing, as can be seen from the tweet by SpokespersonCHN (2020b): "China is open to joint efforts by the international science community to identify the source of the virus. Importantly, it must be professional, impartial and constructive process." Regarding Hong Kong, MFA China (2020b) stressed that China's sovereignty and security must be respected: "The central government holds the primary and ultimate responsibility for national security in all sub-national administrative regions. This is the basic theory and principle underpinning national sovereignty and a common practice in countries around the globe."

The persuasive potential of tweeting intensified when common-ground themes were combined with other strategies, such as the assumed "we" as in this tweet by MFA China (2020c): "We must work together for a community with a shared future and jointly preserve Planet Earth, the only home we have."

Importantly, regarding antithetical identification, these threads offered a transition within the blame game. What happens here is that Chinese officials first build places for identification within appealing themes and values. Most reasonable people agree with anyone who puts public health before excessive politicization, favors international cooperation, prefers facts over disinformation, promotes the sovereignty of states over foreign dominance, and shows self-reliance in a challenging situation. Right after these positions have been established—or, in Burke's (1969) terms, have become the common property of the sender and the receiver—there comes the catch. The United States is presented as the sole oppressor of these values: "US officials have made too many false accusations against China based on wrong knowledge.

They'd better have careful study before speaking. [hyperlink to Chinese MFA's press release]" (SpokespersonCHN, 2020c). A few days later, SpokespersonCHN (2020d) tweeted,

If the #US has no intention to interfere, why is it so mad and afraid? The national security legislation is just like a security door to better protect the safety and freedom inside. Why would anyone be mad with others for installing a security door at their own home?

Despite the multiple potential places for identification within this discourse, identification through such values does not necessarily lead to trust—not to trust in China or acceptance of Chinese statements on the United States. As a great limitation to identification potential, it must be stressed that tweets from these Chinese foreign policy accounts, especially in the case of the tweet bursts in May 2020, do not seem to receive much attention in terms of interaction, as in replies, likes, and retweets. This indicates that Twitter may not be a competent platform for one-way foreign policy tweeting unless the sender has a considerable number of active followers. In comparison, the strength of a great followership is exemplified by President Trump as he tweeted, "CHINA!" (Trump, 2020c). This one-word tweet received more than 771,000 likes and was the most liked tweet in the data. As such, it does not provide clear ground for identification. It does, however, invite one to evaluate Trump's position on China.

In general, both China and the United States directed blame at each other's governments. In their antithetical tweets, Chinese accounts also singled out some politicians, but in most cases, they referred suggestively to "some US politicians," or "some people," for instance. Thus, the polite language of diplomacy creates places for more ambiguous identification by which one may sustain possibilities for future collaborations and still give audiences the opportunity to identify common enemies.

### ***Period III: Increasing Intensity***

Antithesis was the main identification strategy for both China and the United States in their intensifying blame-shift tweeting in July 2020. Faint aspirations for cooperation witnessed in the spring seemed to have disappeared. While COVID-19 still appeared as a theme, urgent issues about Hong Kong and human rights dominated. July also saw serious diplomatic actions as the Chinese consulate in Houston and the American consulate in Chengdu were closed.

An important question that arises from the data concerns strategy combinations. For the most part, it seems that during the third period, antithesis was employed more often on its own than during the first two periods, when it appeared more often in concert with other strategies. This was especially common with Chinese accounts: "The #US is the top human rights abuser. Its ridiculous allegation on #humanrights issues in Xinjiang is the lie of the century" (MFA China, 2020d). Indeed, China wanted to make its point clear:

What makes #Pompeo think he's on the moral high ground to talk about human rights with China? He should ask how #Floyd, minorities in the US and innocent lives lost in Iraq, Syria, etc. think of the US human rights record. (MFA China, 2020e)

US is practicing stark "America First", egoism, unilateralism & bullying to the extreme. US has smeared others, shifted the blame in every possible way, even created hot spots and confrontation in international relations. US has lost its sense of reason, morality & credibility. (Zhao, 2020b)

These strong accusations certainly frame the United States as the problem. However, the question is how strong the possibility is for identification offered in these statements. These tweets paint a clear picture of the proposed common enemy, but they also tell very little about China. Unlike the Chinese tweeting in May—when China first talked about its values, and then portrayed the United States as its oppressor—these tweets may require recipients to have a bias against the United States already, given that common ground is not established as clearly. If the prior impression of the United States is negative, it might be reasonable to assume the possibility that users will identify more closely with China. Otherwise, these tweets are poorly warranted claims of guilt that might even backfire. However, exceptions appear in which blaming is combined with the use of the assumed "we," for instance, "It's about time that all peace-loving people around the world stepped forward to prevent him from doing the world more harm" (SpokespersonCHN, 2020e, referring to Mike Pompeo after his speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library).

As for the United States, there seemed to be a strict division of labor, by which President Trump kept using ambiguous identification strategies while Secretary of State Pompeo and State Department Spokesperson Ortagus (2020b) aimed their shots more directly at China:

The CCP has broken their promise to the people of Hong Kong, the UK, and the world. We are witnessing a complete erosion of democracy. That is why @realDonaldTrump and @SecPompeo are taking action to treat Hong Kong as a city under Chinese Communist domination.

The Chinese Communist Party is acting in a way that poses real threats to the world, and the United States is going to make sure that we preserve American national security and impose costs on the CCP in order to achieve a change in behavior. (Pompeo, 2020)

While referring to "the world" seemed to be more common in the Chinese accounts, these examples show how Pompeo and Ortagus also used the term to describe everyone as victims of China. They provide explanations for American foreign policy, and in doing so, they present China as a villain, democracy as a value under attack, and the United States as both a sufferer and a virtuous protagonist.

### **Conclusion**

This article has employed the concept of rhetorical diplomacy to the study of public diplomacy. We argue that the contemporary communicative environment of digital public diplomacy calls for an analytical grasp that draws attention to underlying rhetorical aspects. Moreover, examining rhetorical diplomacy through an audience-centric rhetorical conceptualization, such as identification, broadens the analytical framework on public diplomacy. By audience-centric, we mean that, strikingly, it is not members of the

Twitter-using foreign policy elite who define the deeper meanings of their messages. Burke's (1969) theory of identification assumes that individuals in the audience can only be persuaded if they identify with the rhetor. This identification—through common-ground, antithetical, and assumed "we" strategies, for instance—may be conscious or unconscious. Such strategies are central gateways into the hearts and minds of the public.

Our case study provides an example of the workings of identification in Twitter diplomacy. Although politicians and diplomats do not have the power to define how their messages are perceived, they can still make a significant contribution to the formation of places for identification. Our findings suggest that foreign policy actors employ a wide array of identification strategies in their Twitter rhetoric. Our analysis also highlights how identification strategies are combined with each other. They often appear simultaneously, for instance, in combinations of common-ground and antithetical strategies. Twitter, as a global network, also offers a potential platform for more ambiguous identification and identification through the assumed "we" or we as "the world."

While antithetical identification understandably is a standard strategy in any confrontational situation—such as the U.S.–China blame game—we detected three substrategies. *Empty antithetical identification* may occur when the opposite party is presented as bad or hostile, thus encouraging the audience to consider it as a common enemy. This becomes *loaded antithetical identification* when such claims are combined with claims that suggest a common ground to be found between the rhetor and the audience. Clearly, it is not easy to determine how far such attachments to the antithesis can be taken. However, we suggest that on Twitter, threading tweets together may result in places for loaded antithetical identification. Finally, the third substrategy, *ambiguous antithetical identification*, emerges when the true identity of the supposed enemy is hidden.

This investigation is by no means an all-encompassing description of rhetorical diplomacy or public diplomacy as phenomena. Regarding the limitations of our analytical method, rhetorical criticism, we acknowledge that our own perspective as Northern European researchers may affect our interpretations of the subject matter. Thus, our conclusions should be seen as one possible interpretation of the workings of identification.

Nonetheless, this study contributes to both rhetorical theory and the study of public diplomacy. Regarding rhetorical theory, our analysis elaborates on existing conceptual knowledge on identification as the central element of rhetoric (Burke, 1969). Social media, as a place for digital rhetoric, provide fertile ground for the examination of such rhetorical processes. Regarding IR research, bringing the rhetorical tradition more intensely into the study of public diplomacy bridges the gap between the realist and constructivist traditions. Clearly, rhetorical investigations cannot explain collective identity formation (a key idea in constructivist IR theorizing) nor great power dynamics (central to realist IR theorizing). Nevertheless, inspecting rhetorical matters builds a better understanding of the micro-level processes within the global communications system. As Beer and Hariman (1996) note, "Decisions made about the conduct of peace and war are also a result of the successes, failures, habits, and nuances of persuasive appeal among elites and publics alike" (p. 1). Such decisions are affected by framing, among other things. Case-specific rhetorical criticism benefits social science, for instance, by providing a "richly textured understanding of how framing

can be achieved" (Zarefsky, 2008, p. 638). To continue, examination of rhetorical identification can increase the understanding of why some frames are activated and why some are not.

To clarify, our focus has been solely on potential places for identification in diplomatic actors' tweets, not on the actual impact of tweeting. We recommend further research to investigate more closely the use of different identification strategies. For instance, future studies should compare their utilization in different channels and explore how they affect different audiences. Another interesting question concerns the positive and negative effects of public diplomacy confrontations. While the overall impact factor of the U.S.–China blame game is debatable, it probably did not increase the favorability of either side. Reports by the Pew Research Center imply that neither the United States nor China succeeded in its pursuit for international support, as both countries' global images plummeted during 2020 (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2020; Wike, Fetterolf, & Mordecai, 2020). Antithetical rhetoric and scapegoating may in fact rule out the possibility of achieving gains (see Young, 2014), because they may lead to disidentification.

Global social media have significantly transformed the workings of identification in comparison with more traditional channels of diplomatic rhetoric. For instance, it is practically impossible for political figures to conduct comprehensive audience analysis on Twitter. Audiences are probably more diverse than ever—and apparently more divided as well. However, this has not limited the efforts of states to influence global audiences. Both the United States and China have established Twitter as a channel for diplomatic interaction, but in terms of the present study, it is important to note that they may have had different audiences in mind. Both before and during Donald Trump's presidency, social media were important tools for him to seek domestic support. Twitter in particular was a crucial channel in galvanizing his political base. For China, the situation is different; domestic audiences are clearly not considerable targets. However, Chinese living outside the mainland may be one of their top audiences. In this sense, China and the United States find themselves on the same field, but they are playing different games.

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