

Predictability in an Unpredictable World: Ritual and the NATO Summit in Vilnius

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ANTON BRONFMAN, JUL 6 2024

Despite the radical breaks to the European security landscape since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (see for example Fiott, 2023), certain continuities persist in defining the conduct of international relations on the European continent. This essay attempts to grapple with one such element of continuity, namely the ritual of NATO summits. Diplomacy is, arguably, the epitome of continuity in the international system. Understood as the mediation of "necessarily ambiguous identities", and thus a fundamentally human activity (Sharp, 1999, 33), some trace diplomacy's roots to centuries before the common era, pivoting the institution around its function as a communication device (Jonsson and Hall, 2003). Rituals are one of the methods of communication that imbue diplomacy with its seeming timelessness. Of course, the content of rituals can change—although some may point to similarities in rituals happening centuries apart (ibid.)—but their presence in the working of diplomacy has remained vital.

My contention is that the most recent NATO summit in Vilnius can, and perhaps should, be understood as a ritualized interaction, which is part of the broader performance of foreign policy in the 'theater' of diplomacy. But why specifically this juxtaposition? Theater and rituals, as emphasized in anthropological research, differ in some substantial respects. While rituals are carried out with the intention of efficacy (i.e., achieving a pre-determined goal), theater is opportunistic and, even when not carried out for the purpose of entertainment, can be heavily influenced by its audience (Schechner, 1997). However, while historically rituals and theater could be regarded as a continuum on which any performance may be located, the increasingly "complicated interactions between, and continuing convergence of, theatre and ritual" suggest a more nuanced picture (ibid., 624). Instead, it may be appropriate to suggest that rituals are performances constitutive of a wider diplomatic theater. The key, then, is to identify the boundaries of the ritualized interaction.

The distinction between theater and rituals is often overlooked in the literature on diplomatic performances (for an exception see Balzacq, 2020). Therefore, this essay attempts to demonstrate the heuristic benefit of distinguishing between the two conceptually. In the context of the NATO summit in Vilnius, emphasizing the theatrical element of diplomacy can help shed light on the rather animated events preceding and succeeding the summit. Emphasizing ritualized practices, on the other hand, elucidates why these animated performances did not spillover and hinder the progress of the summit despite the unprecedented external environment surrounding the ritual.

The essay is structured as follows. I will first introduce some of the existing accounts of the role of rituals and the constitution of the diplomatic theater in world politics, arguing that the two should be distinguished conceptually through the consideration of the role of the audience, the stage, and the performers.[1] Afterwards, I will apply this conceptual analysis to the NATO summit in Vilnius, looking at the events preceding the summit, the conduct of the ritual itself and the aftermath of the summit. In particular, I aim to highlight the changing role of the audience and the performers. I will conclude with a few remarks on the impact of the summit on European security.

Scripted international relations—the audience, stage, and performers of a ritual

As argued by Balzacq (2020), a ritual is not dependent on an audience. Unlike the theater, where the audience's

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reaction or the performers' interaction with the audience can lead to improvisation and spontaneity, a ritual pivots on a set of highly scripted roles for every actor within the boundaries delineated by the performance of the ritual (Schechner, 1997). Thus, even if what is commonly regarded as an audience surrounds the ritual, it must either participate in its enactment, or remain on the outside as mere observers without influencing the performance. This is not to say that the theatrical audience cannot pass judgment on the ritual's conduct, or that the ritual is not enacted with the wider audience's reaction in mind. However, once the audience fails to play their role or treads inside the boundaries of the ritual, the performance is broken up.

Consider the ontological assumptions underpinning diplomatic summits. The assumption of a personified state permits national leaders and audience alike to talk about nations representing their respective sovereign interests at the summit (Ku, 2022). The function of the audience is not merely passive observation—the audience actively accepts and reinforces this ontological assumption (ibid.). Were they to reject the notion that France, for example, in the face of Macron is present at the summit and representing French interests (however defined), then the ritual would collapse. Similarly, were the audience to cross the boundaries of the ritual, and in this case assume that any citizen, not just an elected official, can act as the embodiment of the state's interests, the ritual would also crumble.

In her analysis of the Bandung conference and the events surrounding it, Shimazu (2013) contends that the domestic audience's perception of the summit was of particular importance. Indonesian leaders hoped to demonstrate a united and strong sovereign nation that was ready to lead the 'post-colonial' states. The description of the conference itself, however, paints a highly ritualized picture of the events. The city was meticulously prepared for the summit. Heads of states represented their nations and recognized the representatives of other nations. A joint declaration of peaceful coexistence was published in the end, albeit not without turbulent negotiations. The moments of improvisation that Shimazu focuses on, namely substituting the arrival to certain ceremonies by car for the 'freedom walk', or the change of dress by some leaders depending on the context, did not challenge the efficacy of the ritual (i.e. demonstrating the unity of the 'post-colonial' world), or the role of the audience (i.e., participating in upholding the ontology of the ritual). In fact, Shimazu correctly asserts that the 'audience' in Bandung, the city dwellers, were rather co-performers, with the actual audience encompassing the broader domestic perceptions of the ritual. Shimazu does not distinguish between ritual and theater, preferring the conceptual tools of the former, however this distinction is vital for delineating who the audience was and who the performers were in Bandung.

As mentioned prior, theater is opportunistic, "occurring wherever and whenever a crowd can be gathered" (Schechner, 1997, 613). In the world of diplomacy, the theater for conducting a haphazard diplomatic performance does not require a highly choreographed stage—it can be wherever and whatever facilitates the attraction of an audience that reacts and interacts with the diplomat (e.g. social media, unplanned interactions with the press, private interactions between leaders). One could argue that because the theatrical performance is more spontaneous, more creative, the attention is drawn away from the context and onto the content of the performance. With a ritual, however, because the ritualized performance is restrained by the rather repetitive and predictable script, the stage takes on a distinct symbolic importance.

Consider, for example, the behavior of Trump while in office. As Day and Wedderburn (2022) demonstrate, part of Trump's rebellion against the ritualized practices of diplomacy stemmed from his rejection of conducting his performance at the right time, in the right *place*. Instead, the former president favored improvisation and spontaneity that instilled anxiety in his advisors because they could not prepare the stage. Thus, Trump substituted ritualized interactions for theatrical, sometimes "grotesque" (ibid., 11), performances which were carried out precisely with the motto 'wherever and whenever a crowd can be gathered' in mind.

Shimazu's (2013) description of the thorough preparations that the city of Bandung underwent for the conference to happen seamlessly demonstrates the importance of the stage. Crucially, Shimazu emphasizes that the city's symbolic value was of great concern. Its mixture of Dutch colonial architecture, providing it with a "European feel", and the tropics created a unique atmosphere, while its history of revolutionary freedom fighters and the tensions brewing in the city due to the Islamic movement made it the perfect venue for hosting a ritual emphasizing unity and leadership (ibid., 235), thus directing the attention away from the performance and onto the stage.

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Lastly, and perhaps most conspicuously, ritualized and theatrical performances differ in the conduct of the performers. I disagree with Koschut (2023) that rituals derive their resilience through elasticity. Similarly, the contention that ritual failure “can prompt individuals or groups to re-evaluate the underlying values and assumptions that inform the ritual” (ibid., 3) overlooks the profoundly unreflexive and outcome-orientated nature of rituals (Schechner, 1997). In fact, Koschut (2023, 4) then asserts, and rightfully so in my opinion, that “in times of an outside attack, rituals may serve a stabilizing function through their repetition”. In other words, rituals constitute an actor’s basic trust system[2] in the world of diplomacy—they foster predictability and reciprocity. On the one hand, this removes most of the potential for reflexivity and creativity, thus making rituals a rather ‘bland’ performance. On the other, this imbues rituals with a resilience to endogenous factors, because once the ritual is set in motion, the participants are aware of each other’s role. As succinctly put by Balzacq (2020, 119), “[b]y the very fact of taking part in a ritual, one agrees to be equal to what has been prescribed.”

In that sense, we can question the extent to which, according to Day and Wedderburn (2022), a diplomat’s personal identity influences ritualized practices. As Neumann (2007) demonstrates, ritualized interactions are not solely present in ceremonial occasions. They also permeate the mundane tasks of diplomacy, such as speech writing. These rituals become a part of the diplomat’s identity-building, and thus adhering to them transcends work matters (ibid.). In a world where the diplomat is expected to be ‘estranged’ from themselves in order to ‘experience’ the Other (Sofer, 1997), rituals function as an effective shared framework of interaction that, when in play, is likely to subsume any personal particularities. This is why, according to Neumann, diplomats never say anything new. Theater, however, “does not impose the same degree of involvement on actors” (Balzacq, 2020, 119). When engaged in the wider diplomatic theater, actors can experience a sense of freedom in what they say and how they act. However, they lose a sense of predictability of their counterpart’s reactions.

A familiar performance—distinguishing between theater and ritual in NATO’s summit in Vilnius

The Vilnius summit of 2023 was only the second summit held in a Baltic state since the trio’s accession into NATO. As emphasized by Merje Kuus (2004, 473), the NATO enlargement process was underpinned by a deeply orientalist discourse, which assumed an “essential difference” between the West and East of Europe. Central and Eastern European countries were rid of any complexities, instead being presented as one entity in need of ‘learning’ West European norms. This generalization, and thus removal of agency, was particularly felt in the discourse surrounding the three Baltic states, referred to by some Western representatives as not ‘real’ countries (ibid., 477). Crucially, Kuus emphasizes that an equally orientalist assumption was to regard the Baltic states as helpless victims of this process. In fact, the Baltics and other countries in the former socialist bloc often used this orientalist thinking of Western representatives to their advantage. However, as it became clear over the next three decades, ‘Europeanness’ could not be simply appropriated by the Baltic countries to assume an equal voice in European matters. The concerns, warnings and suggestions, not least about Russia’s aggression, of the Baltic states and others were often ignored or demarcated as myopia (see for example Hendl et al, 2023).

The stage of the 2023 summit, therefore, possessed multiple layers of symbolic significance. Firstly, the ritual was going to take place in a country often ignored in the imaginaries of transatlantic solidarities. This, of course, was equally performative as it was a testament to a genuine change in the tide of the conduct of European security. The transport of significant military and security equipment to Lithuania from Western NATO allies for the duration of the summit, as well as the firm placement of increasing NATO troop presence in Lithuania on the agenda, was hoped to boost this performance (Balciunas, 2023). Similarly, the city of Vilnius, along with the standard practices of refurbishing roads and hosting facilities, was decorated with flags of the summit with the slogan “powerful because united”, as well as the symbol of an armored knight, representing Lithuania’s “dedication to defend the alliance” (NATO, 2023).[3]

Second, staging the ritual a mere 30km away from the Belarusian border was likely intended to send a message of the alliance’s ‘unity’ and ‘ferocity’ in the face of Russian aggression, amplified by the rumors of a hybrid attack planned by a unit of the Wagner Group stationed in Belarus (Tidey, 2023). These sentiments could also be seen in the role played by the city’s residents. Before the summit, there was an attempt to reinvigorate the ‘call a Russian’ campaign, which was intended to encourage Lithuanians to get in touch with relatives or friends in Russia and relay

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to them the reality of Russia's war in Ukraine. This, however, was ferociously resisted by most Vilnius residents, who went around the city covering up the posters. The campaign, it was argued, sent the wrong message at a time when Western powers intended to demonstrate unwavering support for Ukraine's victory (LRT, 2023). Here, we see the role of the conventionally defined 'audience' in preparing the stage for the conduct of a ritual, and thus assuming a role as part of the ritual in the process.

Another avenue for considering the highly ritualized nature of the Vilnius summit is to trace the behavior of the performers involved in and around the summit. Prior to the summit, president Zelenskiy had made a series of strong-worded media comments, which questioned NATO allies' commitment to supporting Ukraine militarily and brought up the issue of NATO membership (Sabbagh, 2023). These performances were rather theatrical in nature and were largely shaped by a constant feedback loop with the audience, namely the Ukrainian domestic public, who appreciated Zelenskiy's firm and "straight to the point" stance (Fesenko, 2023), as well as the broader international public opinion. In a very different context, but similar in its theatrical characteristic, president Erdogan continued his public resistance to Sweden's NATO membership. However, right before setting off for the summit, and perhaps in anticipation of succumbing to the ritual's demand for unity and reciprocity, Erdogan suggested that his government would not veto Sweden's membership any longer. In exchange, however, Erdogan demanded that Turkey's candidacy for EU membership is once again considered (Liboreiro, 2023). Again, here we can observe a performance shaped not by the strict stipulations of a script, but rather by the interaction with an audience and room for improvisation.

Once the ritual was set in motion, however, the theatrical performances of both leaders were swiftly replaced by ritualized interactions demanded by the summit script. Zelenskiy had to accept the decision not to offer Ukraine an official invitation for NATO membership, or even provide any clear temporal boundaries for potential membership, without voicing any public disagreement that would undermine the ritual's predictable and reciprocal nature. Instead, he had to engage with the familiar script of Western leaders suggesting that the time for an aspiring candidate to join NATO is not quite right, but that their future certainly lies with the alliance—a message first relayed to Ukraine at the Bucharest summit of 2008 (NATO, 2008). Similarly, Erdogan officially reaffirmed his support for Sweden's membership, however any talk of Turkey's EU membership, which would suggest a form of transactional bargaining not part of the summit's highly rehearsed and predetermined script, soon faded (for a review of preparations made before NATO summits see Koschut, 2023). In other words, what was witnessed during the summit was almost a complete removal of individuality of the diplomatic actors for a set of clear behavioral guidelines.

There were theatrical glimpses throughout the two-day conferences, which had the potential to undermine the ritual's script, yet these were resisted by the performers. President Zelenskiy responded, albeit slightly ironically, to the British defense secretary's comments that the UK was not 'Amazon', reiterating Ukraine's gratitude for Britain's military support (for video see The Guardian, 2023b). Prime Minister Sunak also made sure to distance himself from the secretary's comments (for video see The Guardian, 2023a). Perhaps the most notable act of individuality, and thus challenge to the ritual, was Zelenskiy's dress. The simple army-green pants and T-shirt stood out in stark contrast to the formal and colorful dress of other leaders. Notably, one of the highlights of the ritual—the 'family' photo at the end of the summit—omits any visible indication of this challenge.

Conclusion

Less than a month before the next NATO summit in Washington, many are starting to call into question the supposed unity and dedication that the summit of 2023 intended to demonstrate. Delays and inconsistencies in Western support persist, while the message regarding Ukraine's NATO membership resonates that of the diplomatic talk prior to Vilnius (Dettmer, 2024). The hopes that the Vilnius summit would have sent a strong message to the Kremlin, reaffirm NATO's transition from defense to military alliance, and form a cushion for a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive (Daalder, 2023) have since been undermined.

With this in mind, this essay sought to discuss an often-overlooked distinction between theatrical and ritualized performances. Distinguishing between three elements—the absence of a conventional audience, the symbolic significance of the stage, and the relative lack of reflexivity of its performers—I aimed to demonstrate why the NATO

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summit in 2023 may have looked like a fleeting moment of stability and predictability in an otherwise volatile and inconsistent diplomatic theater. Despite, and to some extent due to, the unprecedented external environment, the summit in Vilnius followed a familiar ritualized script that left little room for creativity or reflexivity that would incentivize a reappraisal of conducting diplomatic performances, and thus inspire unprecedented action. Due to their importance in establishing reciprocity and predictability, rituals are likely to remain an integral part of the European diplomatic theater. In that sense, they can be identified as a source of continuity in a radically new European security landscape.

Notes

[1] The focus on these three elements in particular is inspired by Shimazu (2013).

[2] The concept of basic trust system is prevalent in the literature on ontological security, see for example Mitzen (2006).

[3] I would like to thank Raluca Csernatonu for pointing this out.

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