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Research Article

## Determinants of Leader Visits: A Review and Future Directions in Scholarship

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**Abstract:** A recent surge in studies on high-level leader diplomacy has the potential to evolve into a fruitful research field. While the current literature predominantly focuses on the leader visits of two great powers, the U.S. and China, this emerging field requires both broadening and deepening in its scope. We lack data on leader visits from the vast majority of countries, and many existing hypotheses do not adequately explain the determinants in various cases. The more countries that are covered and the more refined our hypotheses become, the more insightful this field will be in understanding interactions among states and international organizations. This article aims to present the current state of the literature on leader visits and suggests potential areas of interest for future research.

**Keywords:** Leader Visits, High-level Leader Diplomacy, Foreign Policy

## Introduction

Since kings, presidents, and prime ministers replaced their envoys in conducting foreign relations by the Second World War, particularly with the advent of jet-engine planes, high-level leader diplomacy has seen an upward trend in frequency. While foreign ministers and diplomats are tasked with conducting foreign relations and possess an information advantage, leaders have increasingly chosen to travel abroad personally. The planning and execution of these trips by leaders and their teams consume considerable time, which can reduce the time available for other crucial matters. Despite its importance as a tool of statecraft and international politics, this practice has largely remained unexamined until recently. Scholars have long emphasized the importance of certain symbolic visits in their accounts of global politics but have generally refrained from collecting data and subjecting those visits to empirical tests. While earlier and modest attempts to collect leader visits on a global scale in the early 1970s disappeared from academic corridors (Brams, 1969; Modelski, 1970; Kegley and Wittkopf, 1976), renewed interest in the late 1980s and the recent renaissance of leader visit studies focused on single case studies, mostly the U.S. and China. Although studies focusing on the impact of leader visits on economic interactions such as trade and foreign investment have widened the scope of leader visit studies beyond China and the U.S. cases, available

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assumptions on determinants of leader visits are still based on empirical evidence from these two great powers. Despite being historically overlooked and predominantly centered on China and the U.S., the study of leader visits holds considerable promise for advancing the field of international relations.

Foreign policy orientations of states, as well as shifts in those orientations, are paramount issues in the discipline of international relations. What is the position of a state in shifting global power balance? Is it moving away from its long-established alliance relations? What determines its foreign policy orientation and any subsequent shifts? What benefits arise from specific orientations or changes in these orientations? Do they result in regime survival, increased wealth, or security from rival powers? The most comprehensive data to answer these questions measurably is derived from countries' voting patterns in the UN General Assembly. Trade relations also serve as indicators of orientations and shifts therein. Alliances and memberships in various international organizations provide valuable insights into these matters. However, the recent surge in academic investigations regarding high-level leader visits prompts the question: Can we consider high-level diplomatic interactions as another reliable metric to address these questions in a quantifiable way? While descriptive visualizations of such visits for a specific country offer insights into orientations and priorities in foreign relations, a deeper examination of the motivations behind these visits can shed light on why they occur as they do. Additionally, these visits offer valuable insights regarding what do states, or their leaders expect from maintaining their current orientation or shifting it.

This review article calls for further engagement with high-level leader visits and data collection, especially for countries that lack readily available data. The expanding body of literature on high-level leaders' foreign visits indicates a burgeoning area of research. Should the current research trajectory persist, culminating in a comprehensive dataset of global leadership visits, it could establish a novel index for assessing the nuances of inter-state relations. This appeal is not unprecedented but a call to revisit a neglected pursuit of amassing global visit data (Brams, 1969; Kegley and Wittkopf, 1976). While once considered a "nearly impossible" task to measure the outcomes and determinants of such visits (Brams, 1969, p. 266), the contemporary revival in leader visit studies beckons scholars to delve into this data to investigate causes and consequences of those visits. As evidenced by post-2010 scholarship, leader visits provide a potent framework for examining and understanding the forces that shape international relationships. These determinants can be broadly segmented into three categories: structural, domestic, and individual. Structural determinants examine the interplay between the visiting and host nations, while domestic determinants highlight the influence of the internal conditions of states in question. The individual dynamics focus on the motivations and objectives of the leaders embarking on these visits.

Before delving into the determinants of leader visits, this review article first debates the importance of leader visits for empirical studies and then provides a brief history of leader visit studies. After offering a comprehensive overview of potential determinants found in the literature, the review will discuss the benefits of expanding this body of work and will highlight promising areas for future investigations.

## **Why Leader Visits Are Important?**

To measure relations among states, there are some well-established tools in the literature such as alliances, joint IGO membership, trade relations and voting patterns in the UN General Assembly (Maoz et al., 2006; Strüver, 2016). Alliances are long-term political choices, and therefore, the importance states attach to them varies from time to time. A state might lose the initial enthusiasm it had when it first entered a military alliance (Gowa, 1999, p. 70), and at certain periods, the alliance might be overshadowed by other political priorities. Even within the same alliance, a state can experience indirect conflicts with other member states (Krebs, 1999), or face military sanctions from the alliance's leading power (such as the arms embargo imposed by the U.S on Türkiye in the 1970s). Therefore, if we consider alliance relationships as a criterion to measure the priorities in a state's foreign policy, we overlook these temporal changes. More importantly, some countries, such as China, have a very limited number of alliances, which diminishes the utility of an alliance-based measure (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 164). Similarity in UN General Assembly votes is a good criterion to indicate that two countries have a similar political perspective and how this has changed over time (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten, 2017, p. 432). However, this measures the converging or diverging attitudes of the two states towards third-party issues rather than the relations between the two states themselves (Voeten, 2021, pp. 30-31). For instance, if a Middle Eastern country has a similar voting pattern in the UN General Assembly to a Latin American country, it doesn't necessarily mean that the relationship between the two countries is close and intense. It simply indicates that these two countries have similar perspectives on global political events. Trade relations are a significant indicator that provides clues about the intensity (high or low) and type (dependent or balanced) of interaction between two countries. However, they are not a reliable indicator of foreign policy priorities or changes in these priorities. When we measure closeness based on trade relations, we overlook many determinative factors outside of the economy that influence the intensity of the relationship between the two countries.

Data sets of leadership visits have the potential to significantly address the issues and shortcomings of available common measurement criteria (alliances, UN vote similarities, and trade relations). Firstly, unlike relatively stable alliance relations, leadership visits provide a measure sensitive to temporal changes. For instance, in situations such as the relationship between the United States and Israel after 1948,

relations between countries can be so clear that a formal alliance has no value added (Gowa, 1999, p. 70). Leadership visits can potentially capture these nuances that might be missing in alliance data. Secondly, data on leader travels focuses on the direct relationship itself rather than politically similar attitudes. As an illustration, comparing the number of visits between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. with those between Saudi Arabia and Iran offers more insight into the nature of relations than a mere comparison of their respective voting affinities in the UN (Voeten, 2021, pp. 30-31). Thirdly, because leadership visits are a practice that encompasses not just trade priorities but many dynamics such as political, societal, and security preferences, they provide a more comprehensive input regarding bilateral relations. For example, Flores-Macías and Kreps (2013) find that states engaging in substantial trade with China are more inclined to align with China on major foreign policy issues, although the evidence is often mixed (Chen, 2023, p. 160). While some research suggests a causal relationship where intense economic interaction fosters political interest convergence (Richardson and Kegley, 1980; Flores-Macías and Kreps, 2013), other studies offer countering perspectives (Wang, Pearson, and Kastner, 2023). Even if we accept the possibility of intertwined relationships between economies and politics, it is not common for security considerations to align with trade interests.

Tracking leader visits offers a time-sensitive, direct, and comprehensive measure of a state's foreign policy orientation and its shifts, for several reasons. Firstly, it is time-sensitive. Leaders plan their travels based on the prevailing conditions at the time the decision is made. While this doesn't necessarily mean that leaders always react to sudden events like crises, they also plan their travels in accordance with more enduring dynamics, such as cultural ties and alliance relations. Consequently, leader visits encapsulate both the immediate and structural dynamics that influence a country's foreign policy orientation. Secondly, it's a direct measure. A leader's time is both finite and invaluable. Given the limited availability of leaders' time and the myriad of issues they must address, they cannot afford to dedicate attention to every matter. They must carefully select which issues warrant their focus, fully aware of the premium placed on their time. Allocating leader's time effectively can spell the difference between strategic success and missed opportunities. When a leader commits time to a foreign visit, it underscores the significance of that visit to the state. Lastly, it is comprehensive. Leader visits are prudently orchestrated weighing potential gains against risks. While leaders anticipate benefits from their foreign travels, these journeys can sometimes adversely affect economic and political relations with third countries (Goldstein 2008, pp. 164-167). Such visits even carry a risk of entrapment, potentially leading to shame and humiliation for the visitors and their country. In addition to these comparative advantages over common measurement tools, leader visits more accurately reveal a state's underlying preferences. Unlike official statements, which are key components of discourse analysis, high-level visits demonstrate the actual

commitments of foreign policy resources, akin to alliances (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 165).

### **A Short History of Leader Visit Studies**

In his pioneering work, which recent scholarship on leader visits has grossly overlooked, George Modelski (1968, pp. 383, 385; Brams, 1969) was the first to investigate "foreign visits and international travel by the world's leading political figures: the heads of state, heads of government, and foreign ministers." He expressed his data in visit-days, representing the unweighted number of days these political leaders spent outside their own countries. Using this data, he found that the total number of Communist interstate visits remained nearly the same between 1955 and 1965, indicating that Communist leaders were still significantly more likely to visit each other than to visit leaders of other governments in 1965. He also noted that the overall increase in visits outside the system was largely attributable to an increase in the number of states. The 1970s saw a surge of interest in leader visits aimed at delineating subsystems in global politics, such as those in Eastern Europe (Hughes and Volgy, 1970; Hempel, 1973, pp. 376-7) and the Middle East (Thompson, 1970; 1981). Thompson, for instance, closely examined intergovernmental visits to develop an alternative method for determining "the boundaries of the Middle East". He (1981, pp. 219, 231-232) posits that intergovernmental visits serve as a valid and accessible indicator of the relative significance of international relationships. His findings indicate that such visits not only reveal a significant portion of the Middle Eastern political network but also demonstrate that visit patterns are dynamic and subject to change. During that period, another line of research utilized visits between heads-of-state to illustrate the hierarchical structure of international influence (Brams, 1969; Kegley and Wittkopf, 1976). By assuming that a nation has influence over another to the extent that it receives rather than sends visits (Brams, 1969, p. 266), this small group of scholars provided a novel method for measuring states' international influence/status (Brams, 1969) and temporal changes in that influence/status (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1976).

Interest in regional dynamics and status among scholars diminished in the 1980s, shifting the research emphasis to studies that examine the domestic determinants of US presidents' foreign travel. These new studies viewed foreign trips as a means for presidents to bolster their approval ratings. While some research found that presidents could enhance their popularity through foreign visits (MacKuen 1983; Darcy and Richman, 1988), others argued that such trips had little impact on increasing popularity (Brace and Hinckley, 1992, pp. 56-7; Brace and Hinckley, 1992, p. 1993). Erik Goldstein's 1997 paper, "The Politics of State Visits," expanded the range of potential determinants beyond merely enhancing presidential approval. Goldstein (2008) posited that status, recognition, trade, and alliances could all drive leaders' decisions to travel abroad. However, his study didn't spark

an empirical research trend using robust statistical tools to explore the determinants of leader visits. Volker Nitsch's paper, which explored the impact of state visits on foreign trade, marked a significant shift in the study of leader visits. Though Nitsch's 2007 paper focused on the effects of leader visits rather than their causes, it introduced two notable innovations. First, it highlighted the Office of the Historian as a comprehensive data source on the foreign travels of US presidents and foreign ministers. Second, it convincingly demonstrated the value of regression models in studying high-level foreign visits. The 2010s saw an increase in studies focusing on the impact of foreign visits on international trade within the field of economics (e.g., Lin, Yan and Wang, 2017) under an umbrella term "economic diplomacy" (van Bergeijk and Moons, 2018). While Nitsch (2007) finds a positive impact of state visits on trade, he also shows that the impact of visits decays over time and that it may require frequent visits to a country in order to have a measurable impact on trade. Contrasting with Nitsch's findings, Head and Ries (2010) detected no significant effect of state visits on Canada's trade, a conclusion echoed by Moons and van Bergeijk (2017) in their meta-analysis.

Under the discipline of international relations, Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009), and Potter (2013) provided competent analysis of leader visits but the real impetus for wider interest in leader visits came in the first half of the 2010s. In 2012, Kastner and Saunders expanded the scope of leader visit data beyond the U.S. context, examining Chinese leader visits. Four years later, Lebovic and Saunders focused on the U.S. case to investigate the determinants of US leaders' travel destinations. Despite their focus on the frequently-studied cases of the U.S. and China, they marked a turning point in leader visit studies for several reasons. First, they were first studies aiming to explore the determinants of leader visits (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016, p. 108). Although previous studies looked at popularity concerns as the protentional motivation for foreign travels, these two studies not only expanded the determinants of presidential visits beyond electoral considerations but also incorporated non-presidential visits into their analysis. Second, they introduced foreign policy considerations as determinants of leaders' visit preferences. While earlier studies, such as Goldstein (2008), highlighted non-domestic motivations as determinants of foreign visits, these two studies were pioneering in their attempt to statistically investigate the influence of multiple motivations. Third, their research shifted the focus of leader visit studies away from solely domestic politics and political economy, promoting a greater emphasis on IR perspectives in the scholarly investigation of such visits.

Although the U.S. had been the primary focus of the majority of leader visit studies (Wang, and Stone, 2023, p. 201), the rise of China prompted many scholars to investigate the determinants and implications of Chinese leader visits. Earlier studies on the U.S. suffered from the unavailability of ready data; however, since the early 2000s, the Office of the Historian has provided a full record of visits by US

presidents and secretaries of state. This has spurred an increase in academic studies exploring the U.S. case. In contrast, researchers studying the Chinese case have sourced their data from various platforms like official publications and newspaper archives. This has resulted in a plethora of datasets, leading many scholars to forego relying on existing datasets in favor of collecting their own (Wang and Stone, 2023, p. 202). Recent efforts to gather comprehensive data on visits over an extended period (Wang and Stone, 2023; Chen, 2023) have yielded datasets that are ready-to-use for investigating various facets of Chinese foreign relations. Beyond the U.S. and China, datasets and studies on other countries are still in their infancy. McManus (2018) gathered data on leader visits from the U.S., Russia, China, Britain, and France to smaller client states, while Goldsmith et al. (2021) assembled selective leader visit data from the U.S., Russia, the UK, China, Germany, Canada, Brazil, India, and Japan to various countries. Efforts to gather comprehensive data for other nations are emerging but remain sparse. For instance, Mesquita and Chien (2021) compiled data on high-level leader visits from Brazil, South Africa, and Türkiye (Balci and Pulat, 2024), while Lavallée and Lochard (2022) did the same for French high-level visits abroad.

## **Structural Determinants**

### **Distance, Population and Time**

Studies on international trade suggest that distance negatively impacts trade, a factor that remains pertinent despite advances in globalization (Disdier and Head, 2008). Despite the advent of the jet engine, distance might still be a discouraging determinant of leader visits because cost of visiting nearer countries is lower in terms of money and time (Hoshiro, 2020, p. 217). Consequently, many studies have considered simple distance in terms of miles, having a shared land or sea border, and being in the same region or continent as potential determinants of travel preferences. Kastner and Saunders (2012, p. 171) found that, all else being equal, Chinese leaders were more likely to visit neighboring countries that share a land border with China. Extending the concept of neighborhood to include maritime borders, Yan and Zhou (2023, p. 395) found a significant influence of adjacency on the travel patterns of Chinese leaders. Ostrander and Rider (2019, p. 842) observed that US leaders focused their travel on European countries and within North America, highlighting the prominence of North American destinations due to the ease of visiting neighbors, particularly when travel technology was more limited. To account for leaders' flying time, Wang and Stone (2023: 217) controlled for geographical distance and found a significant influence of distance on Chinese leaders' travel preferences. However, Yan and Zhou (2023, p. 399) reported the opposite, finding no influence of geodesic distance. Li (2015: 496; Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 170) considered continental proximity by assuming that countries in Asia are closer to China, yet he (Li, 2015, p. 499) concluded that being on the same continent (Asia) was not a significant factor in Chinese travel decisions.

Large countries, in terms of population, are more likely to attract visits from leaders compared to less populated countries. This is not only because these countries offer substantial market opportunities but also because they exert a greater influence on global politics. Wang and Stone (2023, p. 217, 219; Li, 2015, p. 498; Chen, 2023, p. 174) use population as a proxy for market opportunities and find that larger populations are more likely to receive both presidential and premier visits from China. Kastner and Saunders (2012, p. 171) consider population size as one of the measures of power, along with GDP and defense spending. Consequently, they conclude that Chinese leaders are "much more likely to visit large, powerful countries" (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 171). Instead of incorporating population size as a determinant, some studies exclude all countries with populations below 500,000 on the basis that such countries are not significant in international politics, at least for great powers (McManus and Yarhi-Milo, 2017, p. 716; McManus, 2018, p. 987). It is also observed that leader travels have been generally increasing since the Second World War. This indicates the influence of the passage of time on travel tendencies. Over time, transportation technology has improved, norms of travel have shifted, and international conferences have multiplied (Ostrander and Rider, 2019, p. 843). Compared against the baseline of Eisenhower, Ostrander and Rider (2019, p. 845) find that US presidents since the Reagan administration have been consistently and significantly more likely to spend time abroad.

### **International Status**

The international status of a country determines its likelihood of being visited. It is a relatively old assumption that great powers, countries exercising asymmetrical influence over the other, receive the most visits (Brams, 1968, p. 470). Therefore, it is generally assumed that great powers attract more visits. Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 118; Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009, p. 871) find that both the President and the Secretary of the U.S. favored major powers (UNSC permanent members, as well as Japan and Germany) during the post-Cold War years. Wang and Stone (2013, p. 219) confirms this finding in the case of Chinese leader visits. Li (2015) offers a nuanced perspective on the influence of great powers on travel destinations. He argues that engagement with a great power can affect travels to third countries (Li, 2015, p. 494). By examining three mechanisms of engagement—the ratio of China's annual trade with the U.S. to China's GDP, the shared membership of China and the U.S. in international governmental organizations (IGOs), and US presidential visits to China—Li finds that Sino-American interactions within IGOs and US presidential visits to China have a significant restraining effect on China's travels to developing countries and fellow autocracies (Li, 2015, p. 498). Unlike the U.S., interactions with other developing states demonstrate no significant influence on China's travel decisions (Li, 2015, pp. 498-9, 501). Cohen (2022) proposes another causal mechanism linking the status of a



great power with the motivations behind state visits. According to him, meetings with the U.S. President are likely to increase the approval ratings of foreign leaders due to the perception that "the U.S. President is the most prestigious and powerful leader in the world" (Cohen, 2022, p. 493). Furthermore, an invitation to the U.S. bestows additional prestige on the visiting leader, given the competitive nature of securing a visit to the U.S. (Cohen, 2022, p. 494).

The dichotomy of great power versus small power is not the sole classification for states within the international system. Some states may occupy an 'excluded' status. Visits to these states are a significant indicator of the visiting country's revisionist intentions (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 166). Using data on travels by top Chinese leaders abroad from 1998 to 2008, Kastner and Saunders (2012, p. 172) found that Jiang and Zhu were not more inclined to visit countries antagonistic to the U.S. In fact, they were somewhat less likely to visit countries that were the target of US sanctions. While this finding aligns with a status quo characterization of China, travel to rogue states was more indicative of China's challenger-type behavior (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 172). Li (2015) uses the visits of Chinese leaders to the developing countries as an indicator of China's competitive status with the U.S. Therefore, he hypothesizes (Li, 2015, p. 492) that "the more powerful China becomes vis-à-vis America, the more likely its leaders will visit the developing world." Abstaining from visits to excluded states and instead engaging with well-regarded states within the dominant system may indicate a visiting state's endorsement of the status quo. Consequently, increasing leader visits to respected members of hegemonic order can signify recognition of visiting country as a fully-fledged member of this order (Goldstein, 2008, p. 170). Similarly, 'rising powers' constitute a separate category that deviates from the static classification of great and small powers. An increased frequency of visits to these rising powers suggests that the visiting nation may harbor underlying dissatisfaction with the dominant powers of the system (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, p. 166).

Additionally, leaders may focus on visiting neighboring countries to enhance their countries' regional influence and to solidify the status of those visited countries as a distinct region (Kegley and Howell, 1975, p. 1010; Thompson, 1981; Zakhirova, 2012; Mesquita and Chien, 2021; Goldstein, 2008, p. 170). Such regional powers can become focal points of attraction, influencing the diplomatic visit patterns of smaller states. Mesquita and Chien (2021, p. 1558) offer mixed evidence for the hypothesis that regional powers predominantly engage with their own regions in diplomatic interactions. For example, while Türkiye's focus on its region appeared to be transient, South Africa demonstrated a more sustained prioritization of its region. While Mesquita and Chien approach the Middle East and North Africa as the regions pertinent to Türkiye, Balcı and Pulat (2024) consider the Middle East, the Balkans, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus as Türkiye's regions. This redefinition results in the finding that the probability of a Turkish leader visiting a country

within these regions "is 22.2 percent, compared to 6.9 percent for countries outside of those regions" (Balçı and Pulat, 2024, p. 9). Consequently, they provide evidence that Türkiye is a regional power.

### **International Conflicts**

During international crises, leaders may shift their usual priorities, increasingly relying on their Secretaries of State for direct diplomatic engagement due to presidential travel constraints and the specialized knowledge required (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016, p. 111). On the other hand, the necessity for allied consultations might prompt more frequent presidential trips abroad. For instance, Ostrander and Rider (2019, p. 843) view war as a primary factor necessitating presidential travel. However, they also note that the expectation of increased U.S. presidential travel during wartime is unfounded (Ostrander and Rider, 2019, p. 844). Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 119) find no significant impact of crisis-induced shocks on the travel patterns of either the U.S. Secretary of State or the President. Similarly, Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 322) observe that U.S. presidential travel does not significantly change in response to military involvements or opportunities for military action worldwide. In a different context, Li (2015) investigates how China's territorial disputes in a given year affect its leaders' travels, especially to developing nations. He concludes that China's focus on territorial disputes substantially reduces its leaders' likelihood of visiting the developing world or fellow autocracies (Li, 2015, p. 499).

### **Alliances, Wedge and Realignment**

Leaders of countries within the same alliance are expected to visit each other more frequently given that they share similar security concerns. Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 118) found that, in the post-Cold War era, US war allies were frequent beneficiaries of Presidential visits but not those by the Secretary of State. However, alliance relations are targets of wedge strategies by rival powers (Crawford, 2021) and require continual investment from the leading state (Izumikawa, 2018). Therefore, high-level visits are typically aimed at either moving the host country away from its existing patron or realigning it with the country of the visiting leader. When a high-level leader travels to a foreign nation, they aim "to exert influence in a manner and to a degree which could not be done otherwise" (Brams, 1969, p. 265). Li (2015, pp. 482, 487), for example, argues that Chinese leaders' state visits "are part and parcel of Beijing's efforts to extend its strategic leeway against Washington". Goldsmith and his colleagues (2021) found that a leader's visit increases public approval of their country in the host state, leading to policy alignment between the two countries. Similarly, Custer et al. (2018, p. 14) argue that Beijing's elite-to-elite diplomacy resonates well in the East Asia and Pacific region, where several government executives view China's embrace of their top-down rule as a preferable alternative to complaints from the West. They (Custer et

al. 2018, p. 50) found that the more official visits there are between an East Asia and Pacific country and China, the more likely they are to vote with China in the UN General Assembly. Wang (2022) looks at the impact of UNSC membership on Chinese leader visits to African countries. He (Wang, 2022, pp. 5-6) finds that the estimated probability of a UNSC member receiving a visit from Chinese leaders stands at 23,0 percent and is over five times higher than visiting an African country that is not on the UNSC, which stands at 4,7 percent. However, this is not the case for the U.S. since there is no significant relation between US visits to Africa and UNSC membership (Wang, 2022, p. 8).

### **Deterrence**

A visit from a great power to a weaker state reduces the likelihood of aggression towards the weaker entity and its leaders. Some research indicates that regional and global adversaries of the visited country temper their hostile intentions, interpreting the visit as a sign of support from a powerful ally (McManus, 2018, p. 986; Wang et al., 2023, p. 134; McManus and Yarhi-Milo, 2017, p. 706). McManus (2018) demonstrates that visits from great powers—including the US, Russia, China, the UK, and France—significantly reduce the chance that the visited smaller state becomes embroiled in a military dispute. Furthermore, she finds that a visit by a major power leader results in a decrease in the probability of violent militarized interstate disputes that is approximately 3.5 times greater than that caused by alliances. Specifically, in the case of the US, the deterrent effect of visits is enhanced when they are accompanied by supportive statements and alliances (McManus, 2018, p. 991). However, Bader (2015, pp. 23, 27) looks at the impact of Chinese leader visits and find that visits of Chinese leaders have no impact on the likelihood of regime survival for autocratic countries.

Similarly, other studies suggest that domestic opposition within the visited nation often abandons plans for revolutions or coups after visits from great powers (Malis and Smith, 2021). An in-person diplomatic visit acts as a credible and public signal of the leader's strength, potentially deterring opponents from taking actions. This signal is credible because the great power's participation in the visit demonstrates confidence that the leader on the weaker side will remain in office long enough to reap the benefits of the visit (Malis and Smith, 2021, p. 244). This display of confidence from the great power can lead potential opponents to view the incumbent's strength as unchallengeable. Malis and Smith (2021, p. 251) find that a visit (both hosting the U.S. president and traveling to the U.S.) is associated with a 51-70% reduction in the risk of removal from the office. Yet, other research finds no discernible impact of such great power visits on the host leader's popularity (Goldsmith et al., 2021, p. 1353). McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017, p. 703) offer a more nuanced perspective by considering the effect of regime type. Visits from leaders of a democratic great power might deter external threats, but they could

amplify internal challenges against the regime or leader in the host undemocratic country.

### **Foreign Public**

High-level visits to foreign countries serve as a form of public diplomacy. Leaders utilize these visits as opportunities to engage in public diplomacy, aiming to influence foreign public opinion, including shaping perceptions of the visitor's country and garnering support for its policies (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009, p. 864). This effect might not be direct. Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009) find that leader visits have a conditional effect on foreign public opinion regarding the U.S. A high-level visit boosts positive responses from the foreign public about the U.S., but only when the U.S. and its leaders are viewed as credible actors. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as the U.S. foreign policy faced dwindling international credibility, the effect of its leaders' visits on foreign public opinion similarly decreased (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009, p. 872). Thus, the credibility of US foreign policy acts as a mediator, determining the impact of international visits on foreign public opinion about the U.S. In a subsequent study with Kelly Matush, Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2021; Custer et al. 2018, p. 45) examined multiple nations, including the U.S., Russia, the UK, China, Germany, Canada, Brazil, India, and Japan. They found that visiting leaders could positively sway public approval among foreign citizens. When Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush (2021, pp. 1352-1354) investigated three conditional dynamics — power differentials between the visiting and host countries, the popularity of the host leader, and the tenure of the visiting leader — their initial conclusions about the relation between leader visits and foreign public approval remained consistent.

Looking at anti-Chinese protests in East Asian countries, Yang et al. (2023, p. 10) find that anti-China protests have a positive and significant impact on leader visits only in non-democracies. In contrast to the studies by Goldsmith and colleagues, which focus on the outcomes of leader visits, Yang et al. (2023, p. 4) examine anti-China protests as a factor motivating leader visits from China, assuming that Beijing is more attentive to the messages from protests in autocratic states. Leader visits are one of the policy tools employed to bolster positive sentiment towards China in foreign countries. Given that directly conceding to protestors' demands, such as cancelling or suspending Chinese investment projects, entails significant political and economic costs and may signal a Chinese withdrawal from the global competition for influence, Yang et al. (2023, p. 3) posit that China utilizes available policy instruments, such as leader visits and economic aid, to mitigate discontent and garner support from local populations. Leader visits are particularly effective in autocracies because, unlike in democracies where public protests are common, such dissent is risky and infrequent, increasing the importance of signal. Furthermore, autocracies are better positioned to leverage anti-China protests as a

way to demonstrate their political limitations, thus compelling China to invest more heavily in policy tools (Yang et al., 2023, p. 4-5).

## **Diplomatic Practice**

Leaders are tended to travel repeatedly to the same countries independent of strategic and domestic interests. In other words, habits and past practices influence leaders in determining target countries to visit (Lebovic and Saunders, 2016, p. 112; Li, 2015, p. 500). In the U.S. case, Lebovic and Saunders (2016, pp. 120-1; Lebovic, 2018, p. 297) show that while the U.S. Secretary of State tends to visit the same country over successive years, presidential visits appear not to follow their own routine. More importantly Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 121) find that the President did not return to countries that he visited in prior four-year period. However, Li (2015, p. 500) introduces a novel 'year' variable, coding the inaugural year of each target country's diplomatic exchanges with China as '1' during the 1990–2012 period, to evaluate the consistency of diplomatic engagement. This methodology uncovers a pattern for China that differs from the expected diplomatic routine, indicating variations in visitation practices. Wang (2022, p. 4) posits that leaders generally do not visit the same country in consecutive years and includes a one-year lag term for leader visits,  $Visit(t - 1)$ , to control for diplomatic habit/routine. In examining Chinese visits to African countries, he finds a strong and significant negative correlation between visits in consecutive years (Wang, 2022, p. 5). In a broader analysis of global Chinese leader visits, Wang and Stone (2023, p. 214) also determine that the likelihood of receiving a presidential visit, conditional on a visit in the preceding year, is 61% lower than the average probability, and that the likelihood of a premier's visit decreases by 14%.

Although studies focusing on two great powers, China and the U.S., substantiate the norm of not visiting countries visited in previous year, Koliev and Lundgren (2021, p. 4) supports the continuity norm in the case of countries visiting the U.S. In their model, they (Koliev and Lundgren, 2021, p. 4) include Prior Visits as lagged dependent variable and expect to see an independent effect of prior visits, as the U.S. and its counterparts employ visits to maintain diplomatic relationships. They find support for the practice-based explanations, as prior visits have significant and positive influence on current visits.

## **Domestic Determinants**

### **Regime Type, Ideology and Identity**

It is assumed that leaders of democratic regimes often visit countries with democratic rule and good human right records. Since such visits to authoritarian regimes expose the leaders of democratic regimes to charges of hypocrisy, cause public backlash among voters in visiting country, and even undermine the regime stability of visited country, democratic leaders prefer non-visible signal of support

to their autocratic allies (McManus and Yarhi-Milo, 2017, p. 701). For the same reasons, democratic leaders use diplomatic visit, a frontstage signal, to support their democratic clients. Some earlier studies find that US leaders tend to visit "developed European democracies" (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009, p. 870). While McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017, p. 720) find positive and significant effect of regime type, Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 116) find no discernible positive effect of level of democracy, and human rights observance, on the probability of US visits. In the case of Chinese visits, Wang and Stone (2013, pp. 219, 222) find no significant relation with regime type of the target countries. Similarly, Balcı and Pulat (2024, p. 8) also conclude that the regime type does not significantly influence Türkiye's choice of countries to visit.

Leaders are more likely to visit states with similar ethnic, religious and cultural identity and sharing similar ideology (Yan and Zhou, 2023). Yan and Zhou (2023, pp. 396-397) found that genetic distance between China and other countries negatively impacts the frequency of Chinese official visits. In other words, Chinese leaders visit countries with greater genetic distance less frequently. However, Yan and Zhou (2023, p. 399) found no significant impact of linguistic or religious distance on the frequency of these visits. Examining the effect of state identity on visit preferences, Balcı and Pulat (2024, pp. 8-9) identify positive and significant correlations between the visits of Turkish leaders and states with Turkic, European, or Muslim identities. In addition to those ancestral and ideational dynamics, similar standing in global politics can result in political alignment. Wang and Stone (2013, p. 222) find that the probability of Chinese president visiting countries with higher voting similarity is more likely than the probability of Chinese president visiting countries with lesser voting similarity. McManus and Yarhi-milo, (2017, p. 721; Malis and Smith, 2021, p. 250) find the similar result for the U.S. visits.

### **Trade Needs**

One primary incentive for national leaders to engage in foreign travels is to explore new markets for domestic products. Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 116) find that US trade dependence most strongly affect the probability of a country visit by the President or Secretary of State. Related to this, it is also anticipated that there would be an increase in high-level foreign travels when there's a change in the balance of exports and imports (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 311). Although the effect is not very large, Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 322) find that the U.S. presidents travel abroad more when there is a decrease in exports versus imports. Malis and Smith (2021, p. 251) compare the influence of imports from the U.S. and exports to the U.S. on presidential visits abroad. They (Malis and Smith, 2021, p. 251) find that such visits are perceived as valuable offerings by the president in exchange for market access. Given that a visit by the U.S. president holds value for the host country, US presidents often seek greater market access in return. Although some studies use leader visits as an independent variable to measure the determinants

of a trade boost, they indirectly confirm the assumption that leaders arrange their visits to enhance the trade capacity of their countries. Estimating export flows from France, Germany and the United States for the 1948–2003 period, Nitsch (2007) finds that one additional visit is associated with an increase in exports of between eight and ten percent. Although some studies find no significant effect (Head and Ries, 2010; Moons and van Bergeijk, 2017), Beaulieu et al. (2020) determine that this effect is conditional. Beaulieu et al. (2020) suggest that countries under significant control of the Chinese government experience an increase in bilateral trade with China following state visits by Chinese leaders.

### **Resource Dependency**

Leaders of resource-dependent countries are likely to visit resource-rich nations. Kastner and Saunders (2012, p. 170) examined the visits of Chinese leaders to countries abundant in oil and six key metals (bauxite, copper, iron, manganese, uranium, and nickel) to assess the influence of resource needs. Although they hypothesized that "rapid economic growth has made China's economy increasingly dependent on imported resources, particularly oil", they "surprisingly" found no correlation between the foreign visits of China's top leaders and nations with substantial oil reserves or those rich in strategic metals (Kastner and Saunders, 2012, pp. 168, 174; Li, 2015, p. 498). A subsequent study by Wang and Stone (2013, p. 219) also found no significant relationship between the resources of target countries and visits by Chinese leaders. However, Custer et al. (2018, p. 41) discovered that "Chinese leaders are more inclined to grant official visits to resource-rich countries where they presumably can persuade government officials (as the gatekeepers) to grant them access to resource rents". Specifically focusing on China's oil needs, Lee (2019, p. 583) also determined that Chinese presidents and premiers are more likely to travel to countries with higher levels of oil. These varied results might stem from different research designs. For instance, Kastner and Saunders (2012, pp. 174-5; Lee, 2019, p. 577) acknowledged that "some of China's efforts to secure resources might be reflected by other variables, such as the Africa regional variable, which consistently predicts travel by Chinese leaders." Similarly, Yang et al. (2023, p 11) found no significant relationship between visits by Chinese leaders and the natural resources of the target countries, possibly because their study focused on the East Asia region, which includes Central Asia but excludes the Middle East.

### **Economic Crisis and Parliament's Makeup**

Economic crises and the strength of the opposition are two significant state-level structures that influence leaders' preferences regarding destinations for official visits. Primarily, the economic health of a nation is of utmost concern for ruling leaders. Scholars suggest that a faltering economy compels leaders to focus on domestic issues and reduce foreign engagements (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 312).

Unemployment serves as a key indicator of economic distress. While Brace and Hinckley (1993, p. 389) identify a positive correlation between foreign travel and high inflation rates, Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 322) observe that economic crises are inversely related to presidential travel abroad in the U.S. context. Ostrander and Rider (2019, pp. 844-5) find no evidence supporting that presidential travel abroad is related to unemployment. Nevertheless, this pattern might not hold for dependent and less-developed nations, which often seek international support to mitigate their economic problems. The strength of a government also affects travel preferences. Presidents encounter difficulties in advancing their domestic agendas when faced with a divided parliament. Consequently, leaders may turn their attention to foreign relations, where they encounter fewer obstacles (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 314; Ostrander and Rider, 2019, p. 843). Furthermore, leaders might leverage international issues to forge consensus within parliament (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 314; Smith, 1997, p. 222). Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 323; Ostrander and Rider, 2019, p. 844) report that US presidents tend to travel more when contending with a divided government and a polarized Congress. Ostrander and Rider (2019, p. 844) also find that as majority size increases in Congress, US presidents are predicted to spend more days abroad. This is the case because presidents may be less likely to lobby with Congress members when legislative majorities in Congress are large, lowering the cost of foreign travel (Ostrander and Rider, 2019, p. 843).

Leaders can strategically divert public's attention to foreign issue to escape from pressures stemming from domestic problems. Troop deployment and war literature show that presidents can declare war or send troops to foreign lands when they face insurmountable domestic problems (Tir and Jasinski, 2008). Since such endeavors are extremely costly, leaders can prefer less costly tools to divert the attention of the public away from domestic crisis. Moreover, leaders are "relatively unconstrained" in organizing their foreign trips (Potter, 2013, p. 506). Unlike war declaration and troop deployments in foreign lands, leaders do not require parliamentary approval for their travel plans. Bringing foreign policy issues on the agenda of the country is less costly and less constrained way to escape from domestic pressures (Andreada and Young, 1996). Therefore, some scholars suggest that presidents can divert the attention of the public by traveling abroad (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 312). Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 322) find that the U.S. presidents travel abroad more when public is concerned about the economy. Therefore, economic crisis not only motivates leaders to boost trade and investment, but it also forces leaders to escape from the public criticism. Especially when the opposition is strong, leaders are highly expected to divert the public attention through foreign travels.



## **Elections**

During election years, leaders concentrate on campaign events and engage with their domestic rivals, often resulting in reduced attention to foreign affairs (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 315). This can be attributed to the fact that foreign travel consumes time that could be dedicated to campaigning. Doherty (2009, p. 326), as well as Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 323), have found that US presidents tend to visit fewer countries and travel abroad less frequently during election years. However, Doherty (2009, p. 326) recommends a more nuanced view. He notes that the three US presidents who traveled the least internationally during their reelection years—Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush—faced particularly challenging reelection campaigns. Conversely, both Reagan and Clinton's second-highest totals of international travel days during their first terms occurred in their reelection years. This nuanced view suggests that challenging reelection bids, rather than elections per se, influence the decision to travel abroad or not. This perspective might explain why Brace and Hinckley (1993, p. 389) observed the contrary, positing that foreign travel is significantly more likely to take place during presidential election years. Malis and Smith (2021, p. 251) examine the impact of elections in host countries, rather than in the countries of the visiting leader. They discover that elections in host countries reduce the likelihood of a visit from the U.S. president, as the incumbent's prospects of staying in power diminish.

## **Need for Aid and Foreign Investment**

Political leaders of recipient countries undertake diplomatic visits to influence donors' decisions regarding bilateral and multilateral aid. A key motivation for leaders of smaller states visiting the U.S. may include seeking aid from both the U.S. and international institutions where the U.S. plays a significant role, such as the IMF and World Bank. Hoshiro (2020, p. 207) identifies three underlying mechanisms linking leader visits to aid allocation: diplomatic visits serve as a costly signal of the visitor's need for aid, direct aid requests create domestic political pressure in donor countries, and face-to-face interactions offer a clearer understanding of the recipient's needs. Malis and Smith (2021, p. 253) find that when leaders pay a visit to the U.S., material benefits the U.S. offer to the country of this leader increases. Similarly, Hoshiro (2020, p. 219) observes analogous outcomes with visits to Japan, providing more nuanced explanations. Although diplomatic visits to Japan correlate with an increase in aid from Japan, they do not play a role in initiating new aid agreements for countries that have not previously received aid from Japan. Leaders also travel abroad to seek foreign direct investment (FDI) for their countries, similar to their efforts in obtaining foreign aid. Adam and Tsarsitalidou (2023) report that a visit to the U.S. can increase a country's total FDI inflows by up to one percentage point annually, with the cumulative effect reaching 2.5 percentage points within six years after visit. However, this impact is short-term and fades in subsequent years. From another angle, Stone et al. (2022, p. 239)

observe that Chinese investments are more likely to occur—0.10 percent of firm-country-years following top Chinese leaders' visits, compared to 0.03 percent without such preceding visits.

## **Arms Trade**

Smaller states require foreign arms and alliances to ensure their survival. While the literature predominantly examines the motivations of great powers, there are studies that also explore the arms needs of smaller states as a motivator for diplomatic travel. Koliev and Lundgren (2021, p. 4) examine the impact of US military aid on other countries' preferences for diplomatic visits to Washington. They find that a one-unit increase in US military aid is associated with an 18-percentage point increase in the likelihood of such visits. Lebovic (2018, p. 308) takes military sales as the proxy of a country's strategic importance to the US and finds a concentration of secretarial visits in countries of security value to the United States in the second terms of the Nixon–Ford, G. W. Bush, and Obama administrations.

## **Individual Determinants**

### **Leader's Ideology and Preferences**

While there is no systematic study specifically investigating the impact of leaders' personal ideologies on their visit preferences, with Modelski's 1968 work being a notable precursor, many studies use political parties as proxies for leader ideology. Consequently, it is posited that different parties in government can influence the choice of destinations for foreign travel. Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 118) find no significant differences in the travel destinations of U.S. leaders when comparing Republican and Democratic administrations. Conversely, Potter (2013, p. 512) provides some evidence suggesting that Democratic presidents may be less active in foreign policy. In examining the effect of party differences on hosting foreign leaders in the U.S., Koliev and Lundgren (2021, p. 4) find no systematic differences between Republican and Democratic administrations. Regardless of their ideological leanings, some leaders may possess a pronounced interest in foreign relations. Ostrander and Rider (2019, p. 843) propose using the proportion of a president's State of the Union Address dedicated to foreign policy as a proxy to measure their interest in international affairs. However, they find only weak support for the hypothesis that presidents who discuss foreign policy more in their speeches are more likely to travel abroad to advance their agendas (Ostrander and Rider, 2019, p. 845).

### **Leader's Legitimacy**

MacKuen (1983, p. 188; Lee, 1977a), in his seminal study, posits that "presidents can improve their standing by wrapping themselves in the flag". He asserts that

"arranging an overseas tour or a summit meeting can be expected to yield an immediate rise" in presidential approval (MacKuen, 1983, p. 188). Subsequent studies also indicate that a president's involvement in foreign affairs might "enhance the public standing of the president" (Marra, Ostrom, and Simon, 1990; Potter, 2013; Matush, 2023). As a result, leaders are often inclined to travel internationally when their domestic legitimacy diminishes (Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 313; Brace and Hinckley, 1993). From a different perspective, Potter (2013) reaches to the same conclusion. He (Potter, 2013, p. 508) suggests that smaller margin in electoral victory signals a decrease in political power of leaders. Therefore, an increase in political power leads to a decline in a less constrained policy, diplomacy. When leaders win the elections with a high margin, they are likely to engage with more constrained policies like war. Potter (2013, p. 513) finds that there is a strong, statistically significant negative relationship between the margin of electoral victory and the U.S. presidents' foreign travels. Contrary to domestic travels, which often convey a partisan image, foreign trips can portray presidents as symbolic representatives of the entire nation (Brace and Hinckley, 1993, p. 384). Furthermore, foreign visits tend to garner more media attention and present the president as a hardworking actor (Simon and Ostrom, 1989, p. 61; Cohen, 2008, pp. 81, 83). Brace and Hinckley (1993, p. 390) observe that foreign trips are "timed closely with conditions affecting a president's support at home" during their first term. However, Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 323; Potter, 2013, p. 514) found no correlation between presidential approval and foreign travels.

### **Leader's Age and Time in Office**

Malis and Smith (2021, p. 251) find that US presidents are hesitant to visit incumbents whose tenure in office appears uncertain, as reflected by the incumbent's age. Older leaders tend to receive fewer visits from the U.S., as their age diminishes the likelihood of their continued hold on power. Focusing on visit preferences, Lebovic (2018, p. 299) suggests that learning, experience and adaptation lead the US leaders to focus on strategic interests in the second presidential term. Similarly, Lebovic and Saunders (2016, p. 118) note that US presidents increasingly engage in foreign policy during their second term. They also find a similar trend for secretarial visits, suggesting that visits in the final year are focused more on achieving foreign policy objectives than on public photo opportunities. Examining incoming visits to the U.S., Koliev and Lundgren (2021, p. 4) observe that US presidents are less likely to host foreign visitors during their second term. This pattern implies that US presidents tend to invite more foreign visitors at the beginning of their tenure, whereas they favor outgoing visits in the latter part of their presidency. Compared to a second term, a leader's final year in office may uniquely influence travel preferences, as leaders often possess increased freedom in arranging their foreign visits. The relative autonomy of presidents in foreign policy allows lame-duck incumbents to circumvent the impending loss of

power, pursue ambitious goals, and secure a legacy that transcends domestic political constraints (Brace and Hinckley, 1993, p. 394; Cavari and Ables, 2019, p. 315). Cavari and Ables (2019, p. 323) observe that US presidents undertake 50% more trips to 54% more countries and spend 50% more time traveling during their final lame-duck year.

## **Where to Head?**

Despite its promising value for international relations literature, it is only recently that the focus on leader visits has garnered significant popularity. A bunch of studies take leader visits as a dependent variable to explain the determinants of leaders' preferences for travel destinations (Brace and Hinckley, 1993; Kastner and Saunders, 2012; Potter, 2013; Li, 2015; Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; McManus and Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Lebovic, 2018; Ostrander and Rider, 2019; Cavari and Ables, 2019; Lee, 2019; Koliev and Lundgren, 2021; Wang, 2022; Wang and Stone, 2023; Yan and Zhou, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). The vast majority of those studies focus on the U.S. and Chinese cases. Of those studies, only Koliev and Lundgren's study investigates the motivations of other countries in visiting the U.S. Studies approaching leader visits as an independent variable are much more diverse. Despite the dominance of the U.S. (Simon and Ostrom, 1989; Brace and Hinckley, 1993; Smith, 1997; Nitsch, 2007; Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009; Malis and Smith, 2021; Goldsmith et al., 2021; Eichenauer et al., 2021; Cohen, 2022) and China cases (Fuchs and Klann, 2013; Lin, Yan, and Wang, 2017; Hoshiro, 2020; Chen, 2023; Stone et al., 2022), other countries such as Türkiye (Kuşku-Sönmez, 2019; Tepeciklioğlu, Tepeciklioğlu, and Karabıyık, 2023), Brazil, South Africa (Mesquita and Chien, 2021), Slovakia (Šandor, Gurňák, and Bilka, 2023), Croatia (Peternel, and Grešš, 2021), Russia (Papageorgiou and Vieira, 2023) and Iran (Bazoobandi, Heibach, and Richter, 2023) have been investigated to understand the influence of foreign visits on trade, foreign investment, and legitimacy. Although studies taking leader visits as an independent variable do not provide global visit data of countries in question, they clearly prove the possibility of collecting data for smaller countries. Since leader visits are high-profile events, they are easy to track down (Wang, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, the primary task waiting for future scholars is to broaden leader visit studies by collecting data on smaller states and underexamined great powers such as Germany and Russia.

Leader visits serve as significant signals of diplomatic favor and political compliance. While major powers strategically deploy their preferences for state visits as a form of favor, or conversely, withhold them as a means of sanction, smaller states demonstrate their allegiance or express dissatisfaction with their patron states through their own travel itineraries. Current scholarship proficiently elucidates the manner in which major powers utilize visit preferences to convey favor (Yang et al., 2023), yet the implications of the absence of such visits as a punitive measure remain insufficiently examined. Drawing parallels with the

foreign aid literature, which illustrates how major powers curtail aid to penalize non-compliant behaviors in smaller states (Dreher et al., 2018), it is plausible to surmise that the absence of visits from major powers carries significant security, economic, and legitimacy costs for minor states. Consequently, it merits scholarly attention to explore how major powers may leverage the prospect of future visits as an instrument to coerce minor states into adopting preferred policy trajectories. Although the instrumentalization of foreign visits by great powers has drawn some interest from scholars, the strategic calculus of minor states in utilizing their own official visits as communicative tools to articulate their positions, express their demands, and demonstrate discontent remains an aspect that has not been thoroughly investigated. This line of inquiry is significant, given that smaller states possess limited means to signal favor or express displeasure. While great powers can employ a variety of proxies, such as foreign aid and troop deployments, smaller states primarily rely on their voting patterns in international organizations. Data on leader visits could serve as a vital proxy for evaluating the sentiments of smaller states within the realm of international politics.

Numerous studies have assessed leader visits at face value, neglecting a thorough analysis of the visits' quality and substantive content (Kastner and Saunders, 2012: 167; Thompson, 1981, p. 220). To address this gap, some researchers have refined their methodological approach by categorizing visits based on their primary focus, achieved by omitting multilateral visits and considering only bilateral official visits, under the assumption that such visits more accurately reflect the true nature of bilateral relations (Stone et al., 2022, p. 204; Brams, 1969, p. 268). However, leaders' goodwill visits—for instance, to coronations, funerals, and weddings—also signify the importance they place on the relationship with the host country. The rationale for leaders attending the funerals of their counterparts in nations where they have limited engagement with succeeding leadership may be questioned. Additionally, leaders often attend significant events such as ruling party congresses, coronations, and inaugural ceremonies in the host nation, even without scheduled meetings with incumbent leaders. Visiting leaders' willingness to dedicate substantial time to goodwill visits, despite their tight schedules, suggests they view such engagements as highly beneficial (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, Matush, 2021, p. 1344). Therefore, an exclusive focus on official visits can be misleading, and scholars may need to develop more nuanced categories with additional justifications (Lee, 1977b). Another point of contention among scholars is the method of distinguishing the significance of leaders' visits. While some studies focus solely on heads of state—arguing that their visits more accurately represent the interests of the state—others employ a weighted scale to differentiate among leaders' visits. Thompson (1981, p. 220), for instance, proposes a system of three visit points to gauge the importance of visiting leaders: three points for a head of state or government, two points for a foreign minister, and one point for any other cabinet-level minister.

In addition to collecting data on smaller powers and defining visits in more refined ways, another important area calling for further investigation is the individual dynamics influencing visit preferences. Compared to structural and domestic determinants, leader-based determinants for foreign visits have not been extensively investigated. Given the rising popularity of psychological studies within the IR discipline (Kertzer and Tingley, 2018), individual determinants hold considerable potential for further research. Ambitious leaders might follow a revisionist pattern in arranging their visits, while traumatic events may shift visiting patterns. For instance, Li (2015, pp. 490-491; Lebovic, 2018, p. 293) demonstrated that the Tiananmen crisis in 1989 significantly altered the pattern of Chinese leadership visits, with a pronounced pivot towards the developing world. Prior to the crisis, 58.8% of trips were to developing nations; however, from 1989–2012, this figure increased to 69.5%, corresponding with Beijing's post-Tiananmen foreign policy aimed at fostering solidarity against US hegemony. Although the Tiananmen crisis is not analyzed as a psychological trauma for a leader in Li's study, the presentation of the case could inspire research into how leaders' traumatic experiences influence their travel preferences. For instance, a leader who has experienced a military coup might be motivated to alter their country's foreign policy orientation through strategic visit planning. Studies that focus on the influence of ideology on official visits primarily examine democratic regimes. However, personal beliefs of leaders rather than party ideology may more accurately reflect the ideological determinants of visit preferences. Broadening the scope of research on leader visits to include non-democratic cases could enrich these studies.

Leader visits are complex interactions that extend beyond mere dyadic relations; their determinants and implications can be influenced by third parties (Singer, 1963, p. 421-422). For instance, the engagement of a rising state in a region may attract the attention of an incumbent great power, resulting in an uptick in state visits. Therefore, the nature of a region—as an arena of power struggle among great powers—can affect the frequency of leader visits. Related to this, various studies have evaluated the effects of the post-Cold War era on the diplomatic endeavors of US leaders, positing that freedom from superpower rivalry has given rise to novel diplomatic initiatives and priorities (Lebovic, 2018, p. 296; Lebovic and Saunders, 2016; Cavari and Ables, 2019). However, it may now be pertinent to evaluate the influence of the emerging multipolarity on leaders' visits since 2010. Additionally, leaders may orchestrate visits to send strategic messages to neighboring countries, using symbolic visits to a specific country for this purpose. This implies that while the primary motivation of a leader's visit is to strengthen bilateral relations with the host nation, the intended audience may include neighboring states, aiming to produce a demonstrative effect on the host country's neighbors (Chen, 2023, p. 165). While the research design for such complex studies might be more

challenging than that for dyadic relations, these studies undeniably offer a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics behind leader visits.

In closing, the imperative to broaden and deepen the literature on leader visits is evident. By extending our investigative scope to include smaller states, ministerial-level visits, and even travels of non-state actors (e.g., Choi et al., 2023) and refining our methodological tools, we can decipher the intricate web of inter-state relations and the multifaceted strategies and symbolism inherent in these prominent events. Ministerial-level visits, for instance, may often be driven by objectives such as negotiations and mediation in third countries, demanding more intricate research designs (Brams, 1969: 268; Kegley and Wittkopf, 1976, pp. 268-9). Since data on leader visits tends to be biased towards cooperative rather than conflictual relations—because visits are more likely to occur between friendly dyads than hostile ones (Thompson, 1981, p. 218)—research designs that are carefully crafted to account for the absence of visits (Lebovic, 2018, p. 294) are crucial for robust analysis. These more refined endeavors will not only deepen our understanding of international politics but will also illuminate the intricate ways in which leaders maneuver on the global stage—navigating between their personal ideologies and the strategic imperatives of their nations. Importantly, should this interest coalesce into a collective academic endeavor, we are stand to gain a valuable metric for analyzing relations among states.

## Notes

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