

More than a Number: Aging Leaders in International Politics

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How does leader age affect international politics? Challenging the existing literature's focus on chronological age, we argue that leaders do not age the same in the eyes of their beholders. Combining insights from gerontology on age-related stereotypes and studies of face-to-face diplomacy, we show that judgments about age informed by high-level personal encounters have profound consequences for how elderly leaders are appraised and treated by their counterparts. A leader who betrays indicators of "senility" during face-to-face encounters will elicit harsh judgments by activating negative stereotypes about aging. Older leaders can also surprise their interlocutors: those long thought to be senile may show themselves as mentally and physically fit. Perceptions of age, in turn, shape how observers understand a leader's agency and shape decisions to "engage" or "bypass" the leader in the context of interstate cooperation. We draw on declassified primary documents to compare American views of three elderly leaders in Cold War Asia—Syngman Rhee, Mao Tse-tung, and Chou Enlai—and how such views informed Washington's approach to these leaders, finding powerful support for our arguments. Our findings suggest new insights for the IR research program on leaders as well as lessons for statecraft in an era of aging decision makers.

¿Cómo afecta la edad de los líderes a la política internacional? Desafiando el enfoque de la literatura existente respecto a la edad cronológica, argumentamos que los líderes no envejecen de la misma manera según la perspectiva con que se mire. Combinando los conocimientos de la gerontología sobre los estereotipos relacionados con la edad y los estudios sobre la diplomacia cara a cara, demostramos que los juicios sobre la edad fundamentados en encuentros personales de alto nivel tienen profundas consecuencias en la forma en que los líderes de edad avanzada son valorados y tratados por sus homólogos. Un líder que muestra indicadores de «senilidad» durante los encuentros cara a cara suscitará duros prejuicios al activar los estereotipos negativos sobre el envejecimiento. Los líderes de mayor edad también pueden sorprender a sus interlocutores: los que durante mucho tiempo se creyeron seniles pueden mostrarse mental y físicamente aptos. La percepción de la edad, a su vez, determina la forma en que los observadores entienden la actuación de un líder y condiciona las decisiones de «involucrarse» o «evitar» al líder en el contexto de la cooperación interestatal. Nos basamos en documentos primarios desclasificados para comparar las posturas de Estados Unidos respecto a tres líderes de edad avanzada en Asia durante la Guerra Fría (Syngman Rhee, Mao Tse-Tung y Chou Enlai) y cómo dichas posturas influyeron en el enfoque de Washington hacia estos líderes, encontrando un importante respaldo para nuestros argumentos. Nuestras conclusiones sugieren nuevas perspectivas para el programa de investigación de las RRII sobre los líderes, así como también sugieren lecciones para la gestión del Estado en una época en la que los responsables de la toma de decisiones envejecen.

Quel est l'effet de l'âge des dirigeants en politique internationale ? Nous remettons en question l'intérêt de la littérature existante pour l'âge chronologique en nous proposant de démontrer que les dirigeants ne vieillissent pas de la même façon aux yeux des observateurs. En combinant des données issues de la gérontologie sur les stéréotypes en matière d'âge et des études sur la diplomatie en face à face, nous montrons que les jugements relatifs à l'âge basés sur des rencontres en haut lieu sont lourds de conséquences sur la façon dont les dirigeants âgés sont jugés et traités par leurs homologues. Laisser transparaître des signes de « sénilité » lors de rencontres en face à face de dirigeants, c'est activer des stéréotypes négatifs quant au vieillissement et susciter de rudes jugements. Les dirigeants plus âgés peuvent aussi surprendre leurs interlocuteurs : longtemps réputés séniles, ils peuvent se montrer capables mentalement et physiquement. La perception de l'âge influence également la compréhension des observateurs du rôle du dirigeant et les décisions de « l'impliquer » ou de « le contourner » en matière de coopération interétatique. Nous nous fondons sur des documents primaires déclassifiés pour comparer les points de vue américains sur trois dirigeants asiatiques de la guerre froide, Syngman Rhee, Mao Tse-tung et Chou Enlai. Nous comparons également la façon dont ces points de vue ont renseigné l'approche adoptée par Washington relativement à ces dirigeants. De ces comparaisons, nous proposons des arguments richement étayés. Nos conclusions apportent de nouvelles connaissances au programme de recherche en RI, mais aussi des leçons en termes d'habileté politique à une époque où l'âge des décideurs recule.

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Introduction

Elderly leaders are a fact of modern political life. During his 2020 election campaign, the then-seventy-seven-year-old US president Joe Biden was routinely challenged about his age. “For most of human history,” one commentary quipped, “people of this age were usually dead” (Hamblin 2019). In line with such worries, past diplomatic encounters suggest that age might be more than just a number in international politics. In 1977, US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reported that the seventy-one-year-old Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev appeared “out of touch with his surroundings” and “heavily dependent on those around him in getting through his audiences” (*FRUS 1977–1980*, doc. 37). Yet, an even older leader—the octogenarian West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer—was described in a 1959 intelligence report as “physically firm and mentally alert” based on observations “at close quarters.” Accordingly, the report concluded, his inflexible attitude during the Berlin Crisis “should not be ascribed to senility” (*CIA 1959*). Such divergent descriptions imply that a focus on chronological age may obscure important variation in how aging leaders are viewed and treated by their foreign counterparts.

This article breaks new ground by analyzing perceptions of agedness in international politics and their impact on diplomacy and cooperation. Our theory of perceived agedness foregrounds the role of interpersonal meetings. Performances by elderly leaders in face-to-face settings provide powerful clues about aging’s effects. Specifically, we argue that these face-to-face indicators tend to cue widely shared stereotypes about the elderly, particularly those related to “senility.”¹ Such views shape broader views of a leader’s agency, which in turn influence decisions to “engage” or “bypass” an aging leader in the context of bilateral interstate cooperation. We therefore theorize how appraisals of age (our independent variable) affect the way leaders are treated by other states (our dependent variable) through the mechanism of a leader’s perceived agency.

Empirically, we assess puzzling variation in American approaches to two aging titans of Cold War Asia: Syngman Rhee of South Korea and Mao Tse-tung of China. Our review of declassified US records yields three broad findings: (1) US appraisals of both leaders changed substantially in reaction to face-to-face encounters and were often heavily informed by age-related stereotypes; (2) these changes were more abrupt than, or diametrically opposed to, what a purely chronological understanding of aging would expect; and (3) evolving views of Rhee and Mao’s agedness strongly influenced American decisions to bypass or engage these leaders during interstate cooperation efforts. To illustrate that perceived agedness and its consequences were not simply parasitic on shifting geopolitical conditions, we also briefly compare American perceptions of aging in Mao and his deputy Chou Enlai, finding that the latter’s frequent face-to-face meetings generated different impressions and political incentives despite similarities in chronological age and geopolitical setting.

This article makes two primary contributions to international relations (IR) scholarship. First, our findings underscore the significant role leader age can play in state assessments of their allies and adversaries. Leaders of unusual age—for example, child monarchs inheriting the throne;

elderly democratic leaders clinging to elected office—have historically presented unique challenges for other states and played key roles in interstate relations. Against this backdrop, our findings show how *perceptions* of a leader’s age and agedness shape diplomacy. A small but growing literature has examined how objective, chronological aging might influence the foreign policy outlook and behavior of elderly leaders (e.g., Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005). However, shifting the analytical focus to the perceptual dimensions of aging opens the door to examining other understudied questions, such as how a leader’s advanced age could impact the way he or she is viewed and treated by foreign or domestic actors. We delve into one of these new research questions in this article, drawing on candid declassified accounts to shed light on how old leaders are seen by others, how personal comportment in face-to-face settings matters for such appraisals, and how these appraisals affect foreign actors’ decisions to bypass or engage specific leaders. Past work suggests that showcasing youthfulness can affect perceptions of resolve and honesty (e.g., Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012). We integrate such insights with findings from gerontology to make sense of elderly leaders and the challenges they pose in diplomacy.

Second, and beyond age per se, this article calls attention to the value of a perception-centric approach to studying leader characteristics of all kinds. Such an approach helps shed light on a puzzle for non-perceptual frameworks: how similar leader traits are interpreted differently by different observers and over time. The flourishing literature on leaders in IR has, to date, mostly focused on coding the presence or absence of leader attributes across a broad swath of heads of state. Our article joins recent work examining how stereotypes and other perceptual factors shape the way different leaders are understood and treated in specific contexts and historical moments (e.g., Naurin, Naurin, and Alexander 2019; Post and Sen 2020; Schramm and Stark 2020; Schwartz and Blair 2020). A key benefit of such a shift is the opportunity to import insights from other disciplines—as we do from gerontology—to understand the complex ways leaders and their attributes affect international politics. It also elevates the role of leader performances and face-to-face settings, offering important takeaways for elderly leaders in office today.

Studying Leader Age in International Politics

Understanding how old age affects diplomacy matters in part because the age of national leaders has steadily increased over the past two centuries. Panel A in [figure 1](#) shows that average leader age in the international system increased by 1.35 years per decade between 1860 and 2000. The same pattern holds for the three top-ranking major powers of the contemporary era—the United States, Russia, and China. During the 1860s, the average age of leaders in the three powers was 45.14. The corresponding figure for 2020 is 69.67 (see panel B).² Such changes may reflect a range of factors (generally increasing life expectancy, shifts in domestic institutions, or a combination of both) and underscore the importance of aging leaders in international politics.

A recent review notes the irony that “[t]here has been surprisingly little work on age” in political science despite the fact that it is “probably the easiest biographical trait to measure” (Krcmaric, Nelson, and Roberts 2020, 142).

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¹We use the term “senility” rather than medically accepted terms such as “dementia” to highlight the perceptual and negative connotation of age-related deterioration.

²The top-three major powers are identified by overall share of military capabilities. See Fordham (2011).

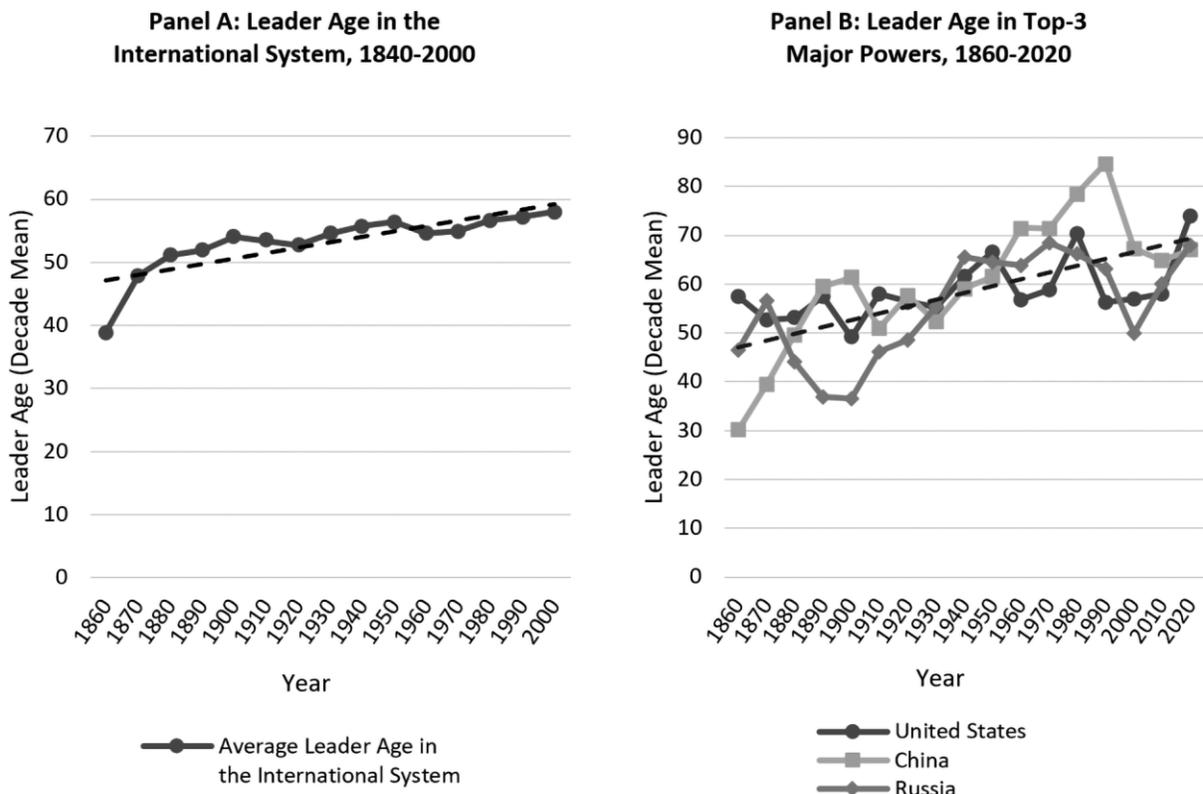


Figure 1. Leader age in international politics over time.

Note. Dashed lines indicate overall trends. Data are from the Leader Experience and Attribute Descriptions (LEAD) dataset plus our supplemented coding for 2001–2020 (Ellis, Horowitz, and Stam 2015). 15,198 leader years are represented in panel A (mean = 54.78; min. = 11; max. = 93) and 541 leader years in panel B (mean = 57.43; min. = 26; max. = 93).

However, one exception is IR research on the link between leader age and military conflict. Early work by Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam (2005) assesses competing logics linking old age and conflict involvement. On the one hand, older male leaders might be less prone to conflict due to declining testosterone, which has a well-documented link to aggression (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005, 666). On the other hand, older leaders may be more willing to use military force to seize a closing chronological window of opportunity and solidify their legacy (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005, 667–69). Horowitz and co-authors find that aging has a militarizing effect under most conditions, although aging personalist dictators are less likely to become involved in conflict (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005, 672–81).

Subsequent research has yielded mixed empirical findings. Philip Potter finds that “the validity of arguments about age” can be “highly sensitive to the choice of the dependent variable.” Specifically, while the age of US presidents is positively associated with involvement in Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs), the relationship is insignificant for crises in the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) dataset (Potter 2007, 367). Others find that older leaders are generally more likely to be targeted with militarized action, especially early in their terms (Bak and Palmer 2010). A recent working paper uses a regression discontinuity design in the context of closely contested elections to find that younger leaders are significantly more likely to behave aggressively (Bertoli, Dafoe, and Trager 2020).

In short, existing works on leader age overwhelmingly focus on conflict propensity, largely overlooking the link between age and other outcomes. Thus, as Krmaric and

co-authors conclude, the subject of leader age “is clearly an area where additional research could yield large gains” (Krmaric, Nelson, and Roberts 2020, 143). Prior studies also conceptualize age as chronological and objective, measured simply by the number of years elapsed from a leader’s birth (Ellis, Horowitz, and Stam 2015, 723). Yet, scholars of aging in other disciplines often emphasize its subjective and intersubjective qualities (e.g., Field and Syrett 2020). They correctly note that privileging chronological age invites a focus on average tendencies and even essentialist simplifications—for example, fixating on the biological changes of (male) leaders. Therefore, throughout this essay, we contrast two quantities—*chronological age* and *perceived agedness*—and show that the latter can affect individual leaders differently in international politics than what the former might suggest.

Theory: Aging, Elderly Stereotypes, and Face-to-Face Meetings

Drawing on findings about age-related stereotypes, our theory posits that performances in face-to-face meetings affect whether aging leaders are ultimately “engaged” or “bypassed” in the context of high-stakes diplomacy.

Before proceeding, it is important to delineate the scope conditions of our theoretical framework. First, while the mechanisms we theorize are intended to be broadly relevant to diplomacy (i.e., age-related stereotypes), the specific state behavior we focus on—“bypassing” or “engaging” an elderly leader—is tailored to the empirical scenario we are most interested in: interstate cooperation on national security

matters between current or potential partners.³ As we note below, alternative responses to perceived agedness may become important in other empirical contexts.⁴ Second, our theory mainly addresses how age is perceived by foreign interlocutors who either have periodic access to a head of state or none at all. We therefore acknowledge that perceptions of aging leaders may well operate differently for other audiences, such as “insider” elites at home or domestic publics. Third, our theory assumes that there are no systematic differences in how age is appraised across individual observers. In reality, different experiences or dispositions may shape how cues about aging are interpreted. We return to the possibility of relaxing this first-cut assumption in our discussion of avenues for future research. Note a scope condition we do not impose: regime type. While our case studies focus on nondemocratic leaders in Cold War Asia, we later discuss how the logic of our theory should apply to elderly leaders in democracies, who may be subject to broadly similar perceptual judgments and policy responses.

Elderly Stereotypes

Elderly stereotypes are stylized beliefs about individuals' traits and behaviors based on their agedness. Gerontology studies have found remarkable consistency in the content of elderly stereotype across cultures (Fiske 2012, 41). Of course, aging is a more complex process than these stereotypes admit. Medical research on aging, for example, overwhelmingly concludes that dementia does not invariably follow aging (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). More broadly, physical decline in old age does not always impair mental or decisional competence (Callopy 1988). Nonetheless, older adults are often assumed to be incompetent and slow to learn (Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske 2005). In many studies, the incompetence stereotype manifests in images of the elderly as being “severely impaired,” “shrew/curmudgeon,” “despondent,” “self-centered,” “vulnerable,” or “set in [his/her] ways” (Hummert 1990). Studies of aging in the workplace also find that elderly employees are often assumed by managers and coworkers to be less motivated and productive, resistant to change, and less capable of learning (Posthuma and Campion 2009). Being “dependent” on others is often seen as another “necessary and inevitable corollary of old age[,]” even though gerontologists warn against exaggerating the risk of dependency among the elderly (Baltes 1996, 12).

Age-related stereotypes also include silver linings. As we discuss further below, old age can be associated with wisdom and emotional warmth (Hummert 1990). Older adults may also be admired as “survivors” who embody subjectively positive values such as the Protestant work ethic (Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske 2005, 272). In workplace settings, older employees are sometimes seen as “more dependable, stable, honest, trustworthy, loyal, and committed to the job” (Posthuma and Campion 2009, 170). Note that negative and positive connotations can—and often do—work in combination. For exam-

ple, the “warmth” stereotype tends to go hand in hand with the “incompetence” stereotype (Fiske 2012).

Face-to-Face Encounters in Appraisals of Age

We argue that age-related stereotypes in diplomatic settings are triggered by cues gleaned during face-to-face meetings. The study of face-to-face interactions in international politics has grown significantly in recent years (e.g., Holmes 2013; Yarhi-Milo 2014; Wheeler 2018; Wong 2019). Scholars have shown that words and physical gestures exchanged in such meetings can help policymakers assess important qualities such as trustworthiness (Wheeler 2018). In addition, face-to-face meetings that feature “vivid”—that is, personalized and emotionally involved—moments matter a great deal in shaping perceptions of threat (Yarhi-Milo 2014). Some studies have hinted at the relevance of age in face-to-face encounters, as in the debate over whether John F. Kennedy's apparent youthfulness in meetings with Khrushchev affected perceptions of American resolve (Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012).

Several examples illustrate the importance of face-to-face encounters in judgments of leader age. David Garrow's study of aging in the US Supreme Court documents how observers came to doubt the capacities of aging justices following tell-tale signs of physical and emotional decline, such as forgetting “what had been said only moments before in oral argument,” making “unexpected remarks that don't make any sense,” sitting immobile or dozing off during hearings, or slurring words (Garrow 2000, 1044, 1050, 1053–54, 1067). Similarly, diplomats often emphasize indicators observed during personal encounters. After a 1964 face-to-face meeting, for example, an American diplomat wrote the elderly Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was “weak” and spoke “with painful slowness” (CIA 1964b).

Observers use a variety of physical, emotional, and cognitive clues picked up in face-to-face encounters to assess an aging leader's condition. Such encounters are especially consequential because personal abilities are thought to be harder to misrepresent or “fake” at close quarters. For example, perceptions of senility may be triggered by displays of apparent memory loss. Numerous studies find a double standard in which “everyday memory failures” may be overlooked when observing young people but seen as signs of mental decline in older adults (Erber, Szuchman, and Rothberg 1990). Observers tend to “be on the lookout for warning signs that would indicate an older adult is developing a dementing illness and, therefore, attach greater diagnostic significance to normal everyday forgetting in older adults” (Bieman-Copland and Ryan 1998, P109). A similar double standard about cognitive and other mistakes has been found in studies of the elderly at work. Mistakes made by older employees tend to be seen as reflecting permanent decline in ability, while similar mistakes by younger workers might be attributed to “having a bad day” (Rupp, Vodanovich, and Credé 2006, 1340–41). Emotional displays can also be influential. “Angry or hostile outbursts” and “emotional lability” by the elderly have long been associated with the onset of dementia (Lachs et al. 1992, 769). These derive from a common aging stereotype—that of the “shrew/curmudgeon”—that casts the elderly as “ill-tempered,” “bitter,” or “humorless” (Hummert et al. 1994, P246). Finally, physical appearance can also matter. One study using experimental photograph-sorting tasks finds that participants are most likely to ascribe negative stereotypes to individuals displaying “old” facial features (Hummert, Garstka, and Shaner 1997).

³As we elaborate below, “bypassing” or “engaging” is *leader-specific* outcome in our discussion and should not be conflated with broader decisions to diplomatically alienate or engage another state.

⁴This scope condition helps explain why decisions to diplomatically bypass leaders may remain rare even as the average age of world leaders continues to increase (see figure 1). To be clear, our research design does not feature cross-sectional data on the relative frequency of decisions to bypass, conditional on being perceived as senile. In practice, however, it is safe to assume that many dyadic interactions involving aging leaders occur outside the scope of high-stakes interstate cooperation that provides the backdrop to our discussion.

Table 1. Face-to-face indicators and aging judgments

<i>Face-to-face observation</i>	<i>Positive indicators</i>	<i>Negative indicators</i>
Mental acuity	Good memory, knowledge of diverse topics and current events, alert, attentive, leads discussion, subtle observations, little use of notes, eloquent and clear speech	Forgetful, preoccupied with single issue, simplistic reasoning, banal commentary; factual errors, lengthy digressions, focused on past events, rambling and imprecise speech
Personality and self-control	Poised, patient, impassive, no uncontrolled emotional outbursts, friendly, witty/humorous	Signs of paranoia, angry outbursts, weeping, insulting, humorless
Physical condition	Thin, strong, handles large workload, no wasted motion, moves without assistance, expressive use of physical gestures, vigorous	Overweight, weak, unable to handle large workload, moves with assistance, loss of vigor, feeble gait, not expressive

The roles and expectations accorded to individuals who hold formal political power can exacerbate negative judgments. In other social settings, an older person who avoids detailed conversation in favor of banal pleasantries or reminiscences may be seen as charming or friendly. However, such behavior by leaders can be problematic. To be sure, it is possible that some amount of “small talk” helps leaders forge positive social bonds and “hit it off” in certain diplomatic contexts (Holmes and Wheeler 2020). However, elderly people in positions of political power who stick to pleasantries and small talk during high-stakes negotiations may reinforce the “default descriptive stereotype of older people,” namely that the individual is “warm but incompetent” (Fiske 2012, 41). A leader who does so despite a reputation for vigorous argumentation might be judged especially harshly.⁵

The discussion above focuses on harsh judgments of elderly leaders. However, face-to-face dynamics can also fuel positive judgments when the behavior of old leaders appears to flout negative stereotypes. Put differently, displaying mental acuity, self-control, and physical vitality in close quarters can trigger *positive* elderly stereotypes. Recall that old age is sometimes associated with wisdom and seasoned diligence; elderly leaders who behave in ways that invoke these stylized traits may be perceived as assets by foreign interlocutors. Brewer, Dull, and Lui’s (1981, 660) classic study of perceptions of the elderly identifies an (admittedly gendered) “elder statesman” stereotype that associates agedness with positive features such as “intelligent,” “dignified,” “competitive,” and “strong-willed.” Table 1 summarizes indicators that trigger negative and positive age-related judgments.

A number of clarifications are important at this stage. First, our focus on perceptions does not deny the reality of age-induced changes. A key insight from gerontological studies is that age-induced decline is both statistically real *and* imputed onto individuals based on stereotypes that exaggerate and simplify them.⁶ To be sure, there is substantial variance when it comes to “when decline sets in,” “how steep it is,” and “the degree to which the cognitive effects of aging may ... be offset by experience of life” (Posner 1995, 24). But even if infused with stereotypes, inferences from close quarters may help better assess a leader’s abilities, especially compared to what was previously known. Thus, the appropriate test of our arguments is not the accuracy or inaccuracy of American views of older foreign leaders—for which

adjudication is dubious in any case⁷—but whether our theory accurately identifies the triggers, timing, and direction of change in age-related judgments.

A second clarification is that aging judgments are almost certainly affected by other stereotypes, including cultural and racial tropes. To be clear, gerontologists have found that substantively similar elderly stereotypes are shared across diverse cultural settings, from “individualist” Western societies to rural China (Fiske 2012, 41–42). Yet, this is consistent with such beliefs manifesting in culturally specific or racialized forms, given that deeply entrenched beliefs about race may “directly [condition] how state actors interpret the behavior of racial others” (Freeman, Kim, and Lake 2022, 185). We find suggestive evidence that such racialized stereotypes affect how age-related beliefs are framed. For example, US policymakers compared the aging South Korean president Syngman Rhee unfavorably to elderly Western statesmen, “notably Adenauer,” deriding him as “an oriental Hindenburg” (CIA 1960). Similarly, a common trope among Western observers of premodern China was that it was a land ruled by an elderly “philosopher king with the assistance of literati” (Martínez-Robles 2008, 9). We revisit the role of culture and race in our concluding discussion.

Aging and Agency

While age-related judgments could matter in many ways, our theory highlights how they shape perceptions of a leader’s governing capabilities, or what we call *leader agency*. A leader’s agency is their capacity to produce intentional, reasoned decisions and to execute role-specific authorities.⁸ A common image—that of the aging leader as an out-of-touch figurehead—captures the intuition that perceived senility should produce pessimistic beliefs about a leader’s decision-making abilities and influence within political institutions. By extension, an older leader who is not seen as senile will be deemed agentic; she will be seen as a reasonably competent and efficacious decision maker.⁹ These expectations are consistent with studies of aging that find that stereotypes and age-related cues trigger beliefs about an older person’s situational awareness, ability to make decisions, and dependency on others.

⁷The American Medical Association (AMA) urges medical professionals to “[r]efrain from making clinical diagnoses about individuals (e.g., public officials, celebrities, persons in the news) they have not had the opportunity to personally examine” (AMA 2017).

⁸This is consistent with standard conceptions of individual agency found in works such as Davidson (1963).

⁹Note that this differs from usages of the term in IR’s “agency-structure” debates, which focused on the unitary state and its causal importance given international systemic constraints. See Wendt (1987).

⁵Wong (2019) makes a similar point about emotional displays during face-to-face meetings.

⁶We thank Marcus Holmes for alerting us to this point.

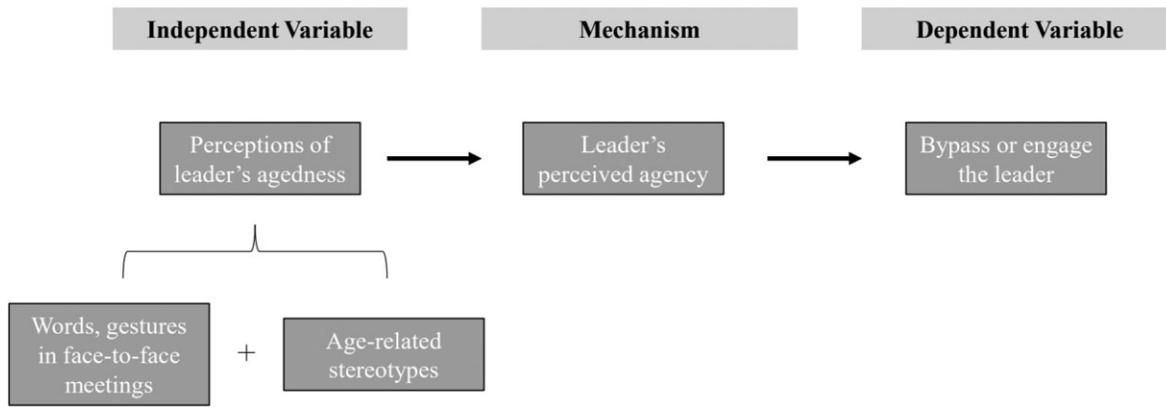


Figure 2. Model of perceived agedness and its consequences.

For most leaders, agency is not a question. Perceived senility, however, raises concerns.¹⁰ Just as the elderly are often dismissed by their adult children as being “stubborn” rather than having legitimate grievances (Heid, Zarit, and Fingerman 2015), leaders appraised as senile may be assessed as lacking situational awareness and the capacity for reasoned decision-making. Those whose agedness is judged positively, in contrast, could be seen as both wise and capable of making reasoned judgments. In addition, because advanced age is often presumptively “equated with decisional dependencies” (Baltes 1996, 11), an image of senility can underpin doubt about an aging leader’s ability to carry out important decisions once they have been made. Of course, domestic institutional structures or other domestic actors can also constrain a leader’s ability to execute decisions. However, advanced age can raise unique questions about dependency in otherwise efficacious leaders.¹¹ They may be perceived as “disrespected but pitied” (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2002, 880), and their preferences understood to have little impact within their government.

Dependent Variable: Engaging or Bypassing Leaders

We highlight a specific behavioral outcome as our dependent variable: state decisions to “engage” or “bypass” an aging foreign leader. As noted above, this choice is especially salient in situations where ongoing or new cooperation about high-stakes security issues is being deliberated.

In our discussion, *leader engagement* refers to the extent to which a foreign government treats the leader in question as its primary partner in bilateral relations. It implies a certain amount of respect for the leader and a willingness to invest in the partnership with her as a central point of contact. The alternative—*leader bypassing*—involves marginalizing the leader as a point of contact. Here, the interlocutor may try to cultivate alternative political partners within the country to deal with interstate disputes. When this is infeasible—for example, if an aging leader occupies a particularly central position in the country’s politics—bypassing may take more severe forms such as postponing diplomacy altogether or deliberately subverting the aging leader in favor of her rivals.

Assessments of leader agency weigh heavily on decisions to engage or bypass a leader. Senility’s association with de-

clining mental abilities, loss of emotional control, and dependency on others creates incentives to find other partners to work through in the context of interstate cooperation. In contrast, an aging leader seen positively—perhaps echoing the gendered “elder statesman” stereotype—will be seen as capable of sustaining productive negotiations and executing change. Indeed, older leaders who seem to be aging gracefully may be deemed to have a greater “sensitivity” for the kinds of diplomatic perspective-taking and compromise that are “necessary if a meaningful dialogue is to take place” on high-stakes issues (Wheeler 2013, 496).¹² This basic distinction should apply to not only long-standing allies but also adversaries with whom cooperative relations are being negotiated. For example, as we elaborate below, US policymakers during the Cold War appreciated that elderly leaders such as Chou Enlai could bring “a dispassionate wisdom based on a lifetime’s experience” to the table (Post 1971, 2). The bottom line is that negative and positive appraisals of age shape whether leaders are seen as agentic and, in turn, whether they are deemed obstacles or aid to diplomatic negotiation and cooperation. Preferences for engaging or bypassing a leader follow from such judgments (see figure 2).

Sometimes, face-to-face clues are simply not available.¹³ Here, leaders must be judged from afar in a process similar to that used by Western policymakers to assess the young North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Without in-person clues, foreign observers have relied on third-hand accounts about Kim from individuals with face-to-face access. Observers may also look for clues about the leader’s condition through public appearances. Such datapoints tend to be less informative given that the credibility of third parties may be questionable (e.g., ex-basketball player Dennis Rodman’s reports after meeting with Kim Jong-un; Zinser 2013). Moreover, older leaders may be carefully stage managed or withheld from public appearances altogether. Thus, age judgments from afar in diplomatic contexts may rely especially heavily on off-the-shelf stereotypes (figure 3).

A few clarifications are in order. First, we focus on a leader-specific outcome. Bypassing or engaging a leader is not equivalent to adopting a broader strategy of containment or engagement toward another state. For example, American officials in our Rhee case study below were

¹⁰ Although not our focus, extremely young leaders or leaders of any age that suffer from health problems may also have their agency questioned (e.g., McDermott 2007).

¹¹ We return to how regime type and domestic institutions may affect such processes in our Discussion section.

¹² In the context of security competition, Booth and Wheeler (2008, 7) define “security dilemma sensibility” as a leader’s “intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness toward, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others.” This hints at how a leader’s age might be an asset if seen as improving awareness of his political environment and the capacity to make influential decisions.

¹³ On variation in high-level meetings, see Lebovic and Saunders (2016).

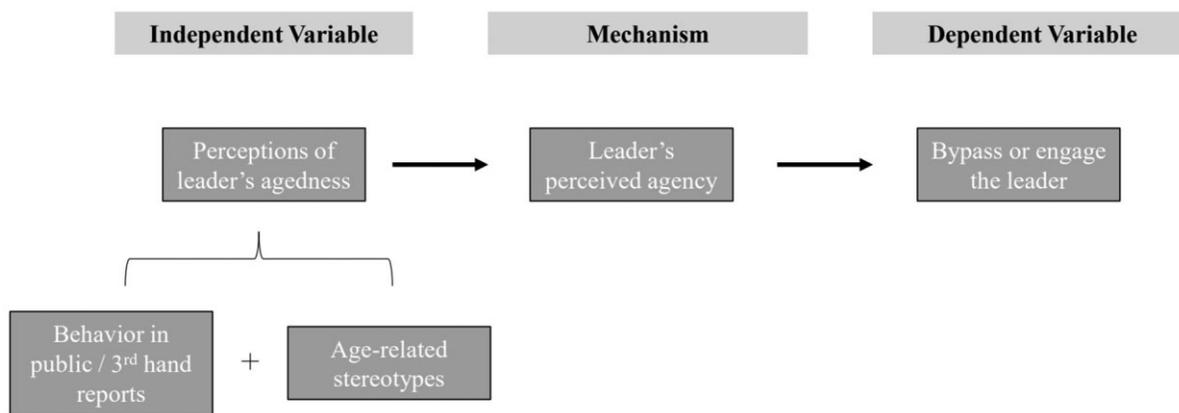


Figure 3. Perceiving age from a distance.

always intent on engaging South Korea as a geopolitical partner; the relevant question was whether they sought to do this primarily through Rhee or alternative leaders. Similarly, Washington pursued engagement with China in 1971 due to strategic considerations. The question our theory sheds light on is whether they believed Mao was a viable leader to work with in order to implement this policy.

Second, we acknowledge that the values of the dependent variable in our theory represent stark contrasts. More subtle responses to aging leaders, such as simply maintaining the status quo or quietly hedging bets, might also be available. One reason we focus narrowly on the bypassing versus engaging dichotomy is our interest in the diplomacy of high-stakes security cooperation, where the gravity or urgency of the issue at hand calls for more decisive options and makes more nuanced approaches less feasible. Moreover, including subtler policy options in our analysis could create challenges for measurement. “Hedging” or maintaining the status quo may be observationally similar to routine diplomacy and difficult to empirically disentangle.¹⁴ We therefore believe that it is appropriate to focus on explaining relatively extreme outcomes as a first cut, albeit acknowledging that future research might investigate more nuanced responses to perceived agedness.¹⁵

Lastly, some may wonder if senility may present opportunities for exploitation, a further option beyond bypassing or engaging. However, insights from gerontology suggest two reasons why foreign states are unlikely to attempt to co-opt or manipulate elderly leaders in the political context we analyze. First, senility is closely linked with stubbornness and an unwillingness to change. This closed-mindedness, even if accompanied by useful traits such as warmth or friendliness, will pose a significant problem in diplomatic contexts where compromise is critical. Second, senility is closely linked with dependency. This means that judgments of senility will be coupled with the sense that the weak leader is already being manipulated by more proximate actors. Indeed, our case studies include evidence that leaders seen as senile were bypassed in part because they were assumed to be co-opted by others in their own government. Thus, while they may look like useful targets for exploitation in other contexts, foreign leaders seen as senile are more problematic than useful to foreign counterparts in high-stakes diplomacy.

¹⁴ Similar concerns have been raised about the analytical value of the broader concept of “hedging” in IR. See [Lim and Cooper \(2015\)](#).

¹⁵ We return to this issue in the Conclusion.

Research Design

We analyze US relations with two central figures of Cold War Asia: Syngman Rhee of South Korea and Mao Tse-tung of China. Rhee rose to prominence during the period of Japanese occupation and cultivated influential acquaintances in the United States while earning degrees from George Washington, Harvard, and Princeton. He then took power in South Korea in 1948 and ruled until 1960. Mao led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and stayed in power until his death in 1976. We also briefly compare Mao to his elderly deputy Chou Enlai, taking advantage of the latter’s greater visibility to Western counterparts during the same period.

There are two primary benefits to our research design. First, by decomposing each case into an early and late period, we can trace shifts in the key quantities of interest (i.e., perceived ageness, perceived agency, bypassing or engaging the leader) while holding relatively constant larger structural factors that might otherwise affect the causal process. This overtime design is especially useful for illuminating two puzzles: why Rhee was seen as declining in the late 1950s but not earlier and why the widespread belief in Mao’s decline in the 1960s was rejected in the early 1970s. We also see how face-to-face access across both periods, along with consistent displays of mental and physical health, led to consistent perceptions of non-senility in the case of Chou Enlai. Second, these cases individually pose “tough tests” for our theory given that US policymakers arguably had few *prima facie* reasons to fixate on the negative effects of Rhee’s (i.e., an allied leader’s) agedness. Intuitively, it would also not have been easy for them to view the aging Mao positively after decades of geopolitical enmity. Unexpected changes in perceived agedness therefore serve as powerful evidence that face-to-face interactions and aging stereotypes matter in ways predicted by our theory. Our online supplementary appendix includes further details of our case study methodology. [Table 2](#) summarizes their key features.

Case Study 1: Syngman Rhee, 1946–1960

Period 1: “We Still Love You, You S.O.B.”

BACKGROUND

Syngman Rhee consistently advocated more ambitious war aims during the Korean War than the United States, creating significant tension between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) during the early years of their partnership. During the Korean War armistice negotiations,

Table 2. Research design overview

Case/period	Scenario	Perceived agedness (IV)	Perceived agency	Behavioral outcome (DV)	Description
<i>Syngman Rhee</i> Period 1: 1946–1955	Existing alliance	Non-senile	High	Leader engagement	US bargains, compromises with Rhee
<i>Syngman Rhee</i> Period 2: 1956–1960	Existing alliance	Senile	Low	Leader bypassing	US engineers Rhee's departure
<i>Mao Tse-tung</i> Period 1: 1962–1971	Rapprochement	Senile	Low	Leader bypassing	US pessimistic about engaging Mao
<i>Mao Tse-tung</i> Period 2: 1972–1975	Rapprochement	Non-senile	High	Leader engagement	US increasingly confident about engaging Mao
<i>Chou Enlai</i> Both periods	Rapprochement	Non-senile	High	Optimism for leader engagement/leader engagement	US sees Chou as highly competent in both periods

for example, Rhee threatened to sabotage talks by independently continuing the war. American pushback led Rhee to demand a mutual security pact as a price for his cooperation (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 69). Rhee later unilaterally released 25,000 North Korean prisoners of war (*Hong 2000*, chapter 3), an act that “profoundly shocked” US officials (*Clark 1954*, 281). Washington considered bypassing Rhee by placing him under “protective custody” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 492) but ultimately chose to offer generous aid and a mutual defense treaty in exchange for South Korean adherence to the armistice.

PERCEPTIONS OF RHEE'S AGEDNESS

In terms of chronological age, Rhee was already seventy-three years old when he became South Korea's president and seventy-eight by the time the Korean War armistice was concluded. However, on the rare occasions Rhee's age was referenced in this first period, it was cited as one reason behind his nationalistic policy positions rather than a factor affecting his competence. For example, General Mark W. Clark, Commander of the United Nations (UN) Forces in Korea, argued that “Rhee's age, his strong feeling that time is running out” were “compelling motives which must be fully considered in analyzing the ROK potential [to frustrate U.S. efforts]” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 558). Such appraisals link Rhee's age to shortened time horizons, echoing a dynamic posited in existing work on chronological leader age (*Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005*).¹⁶

However, US observers by and large did not infer that the elderly president was senile or that his agency as a leader had been compromised. The reason was that Rhee's face-to-face performances did not consistently suggest age-related decline. Ambassador Ellis Briggs, for example, reported in mid-1954 that Rhee's “[m]ind wandered several times during [their] half-hour meeting and he appeared confused and to have difficulty expressing himself” (*FRUS 1952–1954*, Pt. 2, doc. 915). However, two days later, Briggs met Rhee again and reported that his “general condition and alertness [had been] much improved” (*FRUS 1952–1954*, Pt. 2, 918). Such inconsistencies led American observers to ascribe Rhee's behavior to strategic manipulation rather than senility. While often emotional and defensive in larger meetings, General Clark noted that in private conversation, Rhee tended to be “calm, dispassionate, and unemotional, his

views [delivered] in a friendly manner” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 484). Ambassador Briggs likewise remarked that Rhee could work himself up to an “emotional state and spoke of leading [his] people north to suicide if necessary,” while at other times he could appear “subdued and calm” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 579). In this first period, then, Rhee's advanced chronological age did not produce a perception of compromised leadership due to aging.

A dissenting view was issued by John Muccio, who preceded Briggs as US Ambassador to Korea. Muccio initially held Rhee in high regard, later recalling him as a leader who “understood the very complex world setup,” “worked well under stress,” and “expressed himself in English, orally and in writing, beautifully” (quoted in *Hess 1971*). However, Muccio came to doubt the president's mental, physical, and emotional fitness during the Korean War. In February 1952, for example, he noted that Rhee's armistice-related conduct was “becoming more emotional and irrational” as a result of his “advancing senility” (*CIA 1952*). However, Muccio's views were not widely shared and, consistent with our theory, Muccio became one of the few American officials who advocated bypassing Rhee during this first period.

APPRAISALS OF AGENCY AND STATE BEHAVIOR

Despite their disagreements, American interlocutors saw Rhee as agentic. In General Lyman Lemnitzer's words, “Rhee [w]as a shrewd, astute, hard-bargaining, old patriot, who knows how to get what he wants and usually does” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 296). Rather than a dependent elderly figurehead, Rhee was seen as in control; Ambassador Briggs stated unambiguously that it was “President Rhee who is calling turns” in the ROK government (*FRUS 1952–1954*, Pt. 2, doc. 934). Such appraisals warranted efforts to engage the South Korean leader. As Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson argued, the best way to deal with the Korea problem was to “convince [Rhee] that working with us is the best way of achieving [his] objective[s]” (*FRUS 1952–1954*, Pt. 2, doc. 649). President Eisenhower agreed that Rhee had to be engaged and managed, not bypassed: “We must not reply to President Rhee by throwing a wet fish in his face ... [Our approach should] have as its theme, ‘We still love you, you s.o.b.’” (*FRUS 1952–1954*, Pt. 2, doc. 885).

Meanwhile, Ambassador John Muccio's dissenting appraisal of Rhee's agedness led him to advocate bypassing

¹⁶ See online supplementary appendix for elaboration.

him earlier than other American observers, suggesting that the United States should cultivate alternative leaders to work with (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 34). In 1951, Muccio wrote that the soundness of the armistice proposal was “understood by Rhee in his more lucid moments,” and that “[i]t is hard therefore to describe reasons for his [opposition] except in terms of [a] baffled old man searching for any expedient to protect his position” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 477). In June 1952, Muccio also invoked the dependency stereotype: “[The i]mportance [of] principal advisors around Rhee will probably be greater in future than in [the] past since as I have reported, Rhee ... [is becoming] senile” (*FRUS 1952–1954, Korea*, Pt. 1, doc. 195).

Period 2: The “Arteriosclerosis of Ideas”

BACKGROUND

In the years following the Korean War, US officials clashed with Rhee over monitoring the postwar armistice agreement and Rhee’s domestic political decisions. The latter included a series of politically repressive acts, including the draconian strengthening of the “National Security Law” (December 1958), the closure of an anti-government newspaper (April 1959), the execution of a minority party leader (July 1959), and large-scale election fraud (March 1960) (*Hong 2000*, 95–139). When US officials expressed misgivings, Rhee often reacted with anger “at what he termed U.S. intervention in ROK internal affairs” (*FRUS 1958–1960*, doc. 254).

PERCEPTIONS OF RHEE’S AGEDNESS

American officials increasingly reported on Rhee’s apparent senility during face-to-face meetings. In November 1955, Robertson commented that “President Rhee’s age is beginning to tell and at times he appears irrational and irresponsible” (*FRUS 1955–1957, Korea*, Pt. 2, doc. 98). Likewise, during a March 1956 visit, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wrote that “Rhee showed evidence of having greatly aged ... I tried to give him some of the impressions of my trip, but he showed little interest, and he did not follow what I was saying” (*FRUS 1955–1957, Korea*, Pt. 2, doc. 128).

US officials based in Korea echoed these impressions. Ambassador William Lacy described a 1955 conversation “on major questions at issue between our governments” during which Rhee only “exchange[d] pleasantries and talk[ed] in lofty terms of ideals and philosophical problems of [the] modern world. There was no approach to any substantive problem whatsoever.” The banality was “almost completely incomprehensible in light [of] Rhee’s recent actions” (*FRUS 1955–1957, Korea*, Pt. 2, doc. 92). The succeeding ambassador, Walter Dowling, noted clear signs of decline in 1959, invoking several indicators highlighted in our theory:

[C]ompared with three years ago, there has been marked deterioration both mentally and physical...one of most significant indications is his preference now for exchange of pleasantries with visitors, and his inclination towards reminiscences, whereas formerly he was apt to utilize every occasion for substantive discussion or for expounding his views. My recent conversations confirm that he is increasingly forgetful, and that it is necessary to explain and re-explain ideas and suggestions before [he] grasps meaning or significance, although if his interest or ire is sufficiently aroused his performance can still be impressive. (*FRUS 1958–1960*, doc. 280)

Dowling’s successor Walter McConaughy echoed this theme when observing that “no new ideas or intellectual grasp

of new forces at work can penetrate [Rhee’s] mind. He is receptive to flattery and to statements which play upon his well-known prejudices” (*FRUS 1958–1960*, doc. 304). Peer De Silva, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) station chief in Seoul, recounted in his memoir that by late 1959, “it [was] common knowledge that Syngman Rhee ... was rapidly sliding into senility” (*De Silva 1978*, 156).

APPRAISALS OF AGENCY AND STATE BEHAVIOR

Rhee’s perceived decline led to doubts about his agency and fueled calls for bypassing him. Ambassador McConaughy reported that Rhee “is substantially out of touch with realities of present situation and wrong in his assessment of causes, nature, and probable consequences of [the] uprisings ... I saw no evidence of recognition of basic issues or any disposition or capability to come up with answers to them” (*FRUS 1958–1960*, doc. 300). A CIA assessment also argued that Rhee “is superannuated and has lost the capacity to distinguish between the political forces of the past and those of the present and future ... [H]is authoritarian tendencies have been exacerbated by near senility” (*CIA 1960*). The CIA also cited the senility-dependency link when concluding that Rhee’s policies were being manipulated hither and yon “by the ‘hard’ faction of Rhee’s Liberal Party” (*CIA 1959*). American philosopher Sidney Hook summarized the prevailing view when, after meeting Rhee in September 1959, he stated that Rhee and his government suffered from an “arteriosclerosis of ideas” (quoted in *Hong 2000*, 143).

US officials soon converged on bypassing Rhee in an especially extreme form. Eisenhower and Secretary of State Herter agreed “there were special justifications in this case” for “interfering with the internal affairs of Korea” (*FRUS 1958–1960*, doc. 301). The CIA advised five days prior to Rhee’s resignation that the United States must “graciously, and even compassionately ... ease him out of power altogether with his party lieutenants” (*CIA 1960*). As protesters converged on the presidential residence on April 26, 1960, US policymakers applied concerted pressure for Rhee to resign. As we detail in our online supplementary appendix, such pressures were instrumental in precipitating Rhee’s fall from power. On April 28, Rhee was covertly flown out of South Korea in a CIA-operated aircraft. He spent the remaining 5 years of his life in exile in Hawaii. In sum, in the first period, most US observers perceived Rhee’s agency as uncompromised despite his advanced age and considered him to be a valuable partner in East Asia. In the second period, in contrast, Rhee’s chronological age advanced marginally but his agedness as perceived by American observers significantly changed based on face-to-face cues. This motivated a policy of bypassing.

Case Study 2: Mao Tse-tung, 1962–1973

Period 1: The “Ravages of Age”

BACKGROUND

Relations between Washington and Beijing had been openly hostile since the Communist Party’s 1949 victory in the Chinese civil war and China’s subsequent intervention in the Korean conflict. In the 1960s, tensions further increased due to the Vietnam War. Mao’s aggressive drive to gain ideological leadership in the communist bloc exacerbated relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States (*Christensen 2011*, chapter 6). Additionally, American observers struggled to make sense of Mao’s role in the tumultuous political changes of this period, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (e.g., *CIA 1965*).

PERCEPTIONS OF MAO'S AGEDNESS

In this early phase of the case, American observers were largely in the dark about Mao. This led them to use third-hand accounts and worst-case interpretations to make sense of his agedness, relying heavily on negative elderly stereotypes. A 1962 intelligence assessment titled “The Decline of Mao Tse-Tung” attempted to divine insights about the sixty-eight-year-old CCP chairman’s aging and health from the accounts of Westerners who had gained rare access to Mao, concluding that “the evidence [is] consistent with the possibility of some degree of senility on Mao’s part” (CIA 1962a). A 1966 cable from the American consulate general in Hong Kong recounted third-hand reports of the CCP chairman “in the grip of what we would regard as obsessions” (FRUS 1964–1968, doc. 160). This gave rise to a common view that Mao’s decision-making was “significantly affected by the ravages of age” (Post 1971, 2).

American observers also drew inferences from Mao’s apparent retreat from public and Party functions. The CIA judged that the Chairman’s “record of productivity” was “[t]he best evidence” of his decline, in addition to reports that meetings with Mao featured perfunctory greetings and little depth (CIA 1964a). The emotional volatility stereotype was also invoked. The 1962 CIA profile of Mao’s decline mentions hints of “[e]motional instability,” including an episode in 1957 “in which Mao was allegedly so overcome by rage or other emotion that for a time he was unintelligible” (CIA 1962a). Finally, echoing the elderly sentimental stereotype, one 1966 telegram from the Hong Kong consulate remarked “that Mao, as is the way with aging men, has been looking to the past for guidance for the future” (FRUS 1964–1968, doc. 125).

APPRAISALS OF AGENCY AND STATE BEHAVIOR

Pessimism about Mao’s agedness fueled doubts about his personal agency. American leaders in the 1960s often linked Mao’s apparent inflexibility at home and abroad to aging, which was thought to render efforts at cooperation futile. A lengthy 1967 report from the Hong Kong consulate, for example, asserts that “because of increasing age and inflexibility, Mao has tended to equate disagreement with disloyalty and seek the elimination of those who disagree, rather than settle for a consensus as he might have in previous years” (U.S. Consulate General 1967).¹⁷ Perceptions of Mao’s age-induced decline also led to doubts about his hold on power within the CCP. A CIA brief in mid-1962, for example, assessed that Mao’s “generally unimpressive (and increasingly rare) public performances ... suggest that for practical purposes the 68-year-old leader is already out of the picture” (CIA 1962b). A 1967 cable from Hong Kong specifically advocated bypassing Mao given his decline when noting that he “is mortal; more than that, he is old and ailing, and he is destroying the credibility of his own doctrines ... It is to our interest to facilitate the possibility of such a successor regime acting as we would wish a responsible government of the most populous nation in the world to act” (U.S. Consulate General 1967).

The aging Mao was thus seen as a significant obstacle to a diplomatic opening. It was not that the very idea of rapprochement with China was out of the question during this period. Yet, Mao’s perceived agedness was linked to a supposed rigidity that strengthened the case for waiting. A 1968 memo by the National Security Council’s China expert Alfred Jenkins concluded that China’s ambitions “might well

be defined within limits tolerable to us ... But not as long as Mao has his way[,]” adding that “we can take it for granted that we will get no response from any bridge-building efforts” (Jenkins 1968).

Period 2: The “Extremely Impressive” Chairman

BACKGROUND

Richard Nixon entered the White House intent on exploring possibilities for change in US–China relations. Nixon’s national security advisor Henry Kissinger made preparatory visits to Beijing in July and October 1971 to lay the groundwork. Although driven by strategic incentives to pursue cooperation, US leaders were highly uncertain about how far rapprochement could proceed after decades of historical enmity. Under these circumstances, American leaders paid close attention to aging’s effects on Mao. One memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, for example, lists Mao’s exclusion from politics or death as the first of two issues “which have substantial potential for trouble in our relationship[,]” since the United States had to be able to believe that Chinese leaders “can assure continuity in their policy lines” (FRUS 1969–1976, vol. 38, doc. 3).

PERCEPTIONS OF MAO'S AGEDNESS

Initial impressions of Mao—who was just shy of eighty years in 1972—from Kissinger were not overly positive. Continued meetings, however, prompted an upward revision in views of his aging. This evolution is summarized in table 3.

Kissinger’s earliest preparatory visits did not include face-to-face meetings with the CCP chairman. He thus remarked to Nixon that “[w]e have to rely on third party impressions and biographic sketches, of course, to form an impression of Mao” (Kissinger 1972). Kissinger’s conclusions about Mao echo those of the first period. For instance, he notes that “[t]here are *some indications* that due to his health and age, Mao is now uneven in his performances ... [H]e *may* have ‘good days’ when his full mental powers come into play, and ‘bad days’ when the years show” (Kissinger 1972, emphasis added). The start of face-to-face meetings with Mao followed the same course. Nixon visited China in early 1972, unaware that Mao was recovering from pneumonia contracted in January. Mao was observed moving with some difficulty and slurring his speech (MacMillan 2007, 64, 71–72). Winston Lord, a National Security Council staff member who took notes during Nixon’s meeting with the chairman, recalled that “Mao had a couple of nurses around him and clearly needed some help” (Lord 2013). Nixon himself later wrote that “Mao was animated and follow[ed] every nuance of the conversation” but seemed to become “very tired” toward the end of their meeting (Nixon 1978, 563). The result was no fundamental change in views.

Subsequent visits, however, led to significant reassessments. Kissinger returned to China in mid-1972 and again in February 1973. The latter included meetings with Mao and Prime Minister Chou Enlai, covering 20 hours over four days. Kissinger’s description of Mao noticeably changed. He wrote to Nixon that “[t]he Chairman seemed in better health than last year” and that Mao spoke with “great animation, coherence, and allusive skill” in the meetings. Yet, Kissinger’s descriptions retained a somewhat ambivalent character. He stated that Mao seemed “mentally alert” but noted “one or two moments when he seemed distracted[,]” adding that Mao was “helped up by his young female attendant when he greeted me, but got up unaided at the end of our conversation” (Kissinger 1973).

¹⁷ We thank Rick Da for sharing this and other documents from the Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) Presidential Library.

Table 3. Evolving views of Mao's agedness, 1971–1973

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Meetings</i>	<i>Perceived agedness</i>	<i>Basis</i>	<i>Example</i>
Pre-Mao meetings	Kissinger's preparatory meetings with Chou Enlai (July, October 1971)	Physical and mental decline	Prior third-hand accounts, hints from Chou meetings, Mao's reputation	"There are some indications that due to his health and age, Mao is now uneven in his performances."
Initial Mao meetings	Nixon visit (February 1972) and Kissinger follow-up (February 1973)	Mixed signs of physical and mental condition, speculations of "good/bad days"	First impressions from shorter face-to-face meetings	"Clearly he is still mentally alert, despite one or two moments when he seemed distracted ... There is no way of knowing whether he has 'good' and 'bad' days mentally or whether his performance is steady."
Later Mao meetings	Kissinger visit (November 1973)	Mentally and physically sharp, inference that illness had affected performance in past meetings	Full set of face-to-face meetings; 4+ hours with Mao in total	Mao "led the conversation, covered all major international issues with subtlety and incisiveness" and "looked much healthier and thinner than last February when in turn he looked much better than during your trip. (It is now clear in retrospect that he was quite ill when you saw him)."

Consistent with our theory, Kissinger's views of Mao shifted decisively by 1973 in response to clearer signs of vitality in face-to-face meetings. Kissinger informed Nixon that Mao "looked much healthier and thinner than last February when in turn he looked much better than during your trip. (It is clear now in retrospect that he was quite ill when you saw him)." (*FRUS 1969–1976*, vol. 18, doc. 62). He recounts that Mao was "extremely impressive ... He moved and walked unaided and used his hands continuously and expressively as he talked." Kissinger also relayed how Mao "led the conversation," and "covered all major international issues with subtlety and incisiveness" (*FRUS 1969–1976*, vol. 18, doc. 62). Kissinger further pointed out that his meeting "was the longest session with a foreign official [Mao had held] in recent years [which] is of itself very significant" (*FRUS 1969–1976*, vol. 18, doc. 62). The cumulative effect of the 1971–1973 meetings, then, was a striking upgrade in American judgments of the Chinese leader's physical, mental, and emotional state.

APPRAISALS OF AGENCY AND STATE BEHAVIOR

While the effort at an opening to China was initiated primarily due to Nixon and Kissinger's geopolitical calculus, new evidence about Mao's personal condition and abilities significantly influenced their views about the depth and durability of possible cooperation. Optimistic assessments of Mao's abilities after several meetings helped justify bolder steps toward rapprochement. The United States and China moved in 1972 and 1973 to discussing compromise on a broader array of geopolitical interests than earlier discussions. Kissinger's February 1973 trip, for example, featured wide-ranging talks about the future of Southeast Asia, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, South Asia, Western Europe, and arms control.¹⁸ Perceptions of Mao's aging affected judg-

ments about the overall arc of China's policies. Most revealing are Kissinger's assessments of China's attitudes and policies after the initial Nixon visit. The follow-up meetings of 1973—and Kissinger's growing confidence in Mao's agency—solidified a shift toward optimism about the long-term prospects of US–China relations. His November 1973 summary to Nixon starts by highlighting the "close identity" that exists between Beijing and Washington in terms of "strategic perspectives on the international situation." For all intents and purposes, Kissinger concludes, "we have become tacit allies." Mao had shown an ability to compromise on issues of enormous symbolic and substantive weight (*FRUS 1969–1976*, vol. 38, doc. 3).

The role that assessments of Mao played in shaping the US approach to his government prompts an intriguing counterfactual: suppose American leaders had had direct access to Mao in the 1960s and registered signs of mental and physical well-being, as Kissinger and Nixon did in the 1970s. Our analysis suggests that US policymakers in the early period would have been impressed by the Chairman's abilities as a leader had they been able to meet him in person. To be sure, existing scholarship has documented how Mao's policies were driven by his ideological commitments, many of which were clearly misguided (Lüthi 2008). At the same time, as Christensen argues, to say that Mao's behavior had an ideological cast is not to say that his overall political calculus was fundamentally irrational (Christensen 1996, 211–13).¹⁹ Nor does it mean that Mao was detached from the levers of power within his own government, as many US policymakers believed in the 1960s. In short, while many factors contributed to the timing of the Sino-US dé-

¹⁸ See Kissinger's talks with Chou from February 15 to 17 (*FRUS 1969–1976*, vol. 18).

¹⁹ Mao's ideological proclivities notwithstanding, important works have shown that his government's key foreign policy decisions during this period were largely driven by clear-eyed strategic assessments. M. Taylor Fravel (2008, 40) shows this, for example, in regard to China's approach to territorial disputes, concluding that "when compared with other countries, China is not an outlier whose behavior requires a special explanation."

marche, one implication of our analysis is that an American approach to China may have come sooner if intimate conversations with Mao had dispelled pessimistic assessments of the elderly chairman's agency as a leader.

Comparison: Chou Enlai

American views of a third leader—Mao's aging Prime Minister, Chou Enlai—provide an additional basis for comparison. Contrasting US appraisals of these two Chinese leaders helps us distinguish the role played by the factors we theorize—aging stereotypes and face-to-face interactions—from structural variables such as relative state power or the broader geopolitical climate. The Mao–Chou comparison is apt because both were of similar age and seen in the context of the same geopolitical negativity (period 1) and opportunities (period 2).²⁰ Yet, the two Chinese leaders diverged in terms of face-to-face access. Chou was able to showcase his vigor and sagacity in person to external interlocutors during his tenure as China's foreign minister. This led American leaders to view Chou's aging far more creditably in both periods.

Chou had a highly visible role in diplomacy. As early as the Geneva Conference of 1954, for example, the American delegation reported that Chou "turned on all his charm and made [a] visible impression" (*FRUS 1952–1954, Geneva Conference*, doc. 797). Based on such information, Chou was seen as an old but vigorous leader throughout the 1960s and beyond. A 1964 CIA report stated that "Chou En-lai is more sophisticated than his colleagues and has a greater awareness of the outside world. As a result, he is particularly persuasive with foreigners and has a special appeal to Chinese intellectuals" (*CIA 1964a*). Perceptions of Chou as a masterful statesman led to early optimism for engaging him in the event he took helm in China. Policymakers such as Alfred Jenkins of the National Security Council—whose views of Mao's aging and ideology were especially harsh—was hopeful as early as 1967 that the United States and China would be able to place their strategic relations on a new footing if Chou ended up "running things" in Beijing (*FRUS 1964–1968*, doc. 240). Kissinger was positively enthralled after meeting Chou in person in 1971, reporting that the elderly prime minister "was equally at home in philosophic sweeps, historical analysis, tactical probing, light repartee" and that he might well be "the most impressive foreign statesman I have met" (*Kissinger 1971*).

Consistent with our theory, perceptions converged after American leaders gained consistent access to both leaders. As noted above, American leaders came to see the aging chairman as capable despite his advanced age, similarly to Chou. An explanation anchored in geopolitically motivated reasoning, in contrast, would expect convergent assessments in both periods (see discussion below). In the online supplementary appendix, we present further evidence from the Chou Enlai case and its comparison to Mao.

Discussion

We now consider two potential objections to our arguments.²¹ First, it is possible that perceptions of agedness are epiphenomenal to an observer's policy preferences or shifts in the geopolitical winds. Policymakers may "see" the effects of age that they *want* to see; adversaries may find it convenient to assume that an older counterpart is in decline and

partners the opposite. Yet, we find intriguing evidence that face-to-face indicators trump motivated reasoning. Intense policy clashes over the Korean War during the early period of the Rhee case should presumably have motivated harsher views of his aging. Nonetheless, we find that most observers recognized and even praised his political savvy.²² Consider also that Kissinger's appraisals of Mao remained pessimistic in 1971 and 1972 despite his deep personal investment in the China opening. Nixon likewise noted apparent signs of Mao's elderly fatigue in his earliest meetings. Thus, two leaders with plausible motivations for rosy judgments did not fundamentally change their views until more face-to-face evidence became available. None of this is to say that leaders' policy priorities and shifting geopolitical factors are irrelevant. Geopolitics and strategic considerations establish the broad contours of policy when it comes to security-related interstate cooperation. Our theory helps make sense of what happens within these contours. Contrasting views of Mao and Chou reinforce the point that geopolitics is underdetermined; attitudes toward two elderly leaders from the same country diverged until each leader displayed face-to-face indicators of emotional control and mental acuity.

Second, our decision to focus on leaders in personalist, nondemocratic regimes may raise concerns about generalizability, especially given previous findings about personalist dictators and aging (*Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005*). Historical examples of aging democratic leaders suggest that our theory may shed light on dynamics in other regime types. The elderly Ronald Reagan reportedly left off his overcoat and bounded down a set of stairs when meeting Mikhail Gorbachev to ensure that "even though Reagan was much older, Gorbachev came across as the spiritually older person" (*Matlock 2015*). Another example appears in our introduction: face-to-face appraisals were critical to US intelligence appraisals of the octogenarian West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer as "physically firm and mentally alert" (*CIA 1959*).

That said, a promising direction for future research is to unpack how domestic institutional structures can alter the perception or treatment of aging leaders. It is plausible that different kinds of assessments and outcomes may prevail when dealing with elderly democratic leaders who stay in office for relatively short periods of time. One conjecture is that aging democratic leaders perceived as senile may be *more* likely to face a bypassing treatment. The leeway afforded by authoritarian institutions partly account for why Rhee and Mao held onto power for so long, which may have motivated more drastic but rarer forms of bypassing. In relations with democracies, bypassing may take the form of simply postponing deep engagement until a leader perceived as senile cycles out of power in the next election. Yet, multi-term presidents and lengthy prime ministerial tenures—the De Gaulles and Adenauers and Roosevelts—suggest that such a strategy may still require patience. The imperative for bypassing and its particular forms may therefore differ among and within regime types. Future research should revisit our arguments with these possibilities in mind.

Conclusion

We argue that impressions of older leaders formulated in face-to-face settings are critical to how they are seen and treated in international diplomacy. Building on findings from research on age-related stereotypes, we find that

²⁰ Born in 1898, Chou was only five years younger than Mao.

²¹ In the online supplementary appendix, we address other alternative explanations based on leaders' chronological age, changes in leaders' time horizons, and earlier political processes that select for older leaders.

²² We note a major exception, Ambassador Muccio, who believed that Rhee's aging was an important driver of his uncompromising behavior. Consistent with our theory, he was an early voice in favor of bypassing Rhee.

American perceptions of a pair of Cold War leaders in Asia were shaped less by chronological age or geopolitical factors than by their comportment in face-to-face meetings. This, in turn, shaped how their political agency was understood and influenced whether they were engaged or bypassed as interlocutors in the context of interstate cooperation. Our findings contribute to studies of aging as well as the broader renaissance of interest in leaders within IR, showing that age is both an “objective” leader characteristic and also one liable to important subjective processes.

Several limitations in the scope of our study suggest fruitful avenues for future research. First, this article addresses one of several understudied questions about perceptions of leader age in world politics. We focus on perceptions of foreign counterparts and resulting policy reactions to elderly leaders. Future research might assess how a leader’s age—and perceptions thereof—affects the behavior of domestic actors, as well as the resulting impact on foreign policy process and outcomes. Noteworthy in this regard is our evidence that US leaders believed that domestic factions in South Korea were manipulating Syngman Rhee in his later years. Another promising line of work involves the self-perceptions of older leaders. Findings in gerontology suggest that leaders may or may not internalize elderly prejudices (e.g., Hummert et al. 1994), which in turn might explain variation in time horizons or other changes associated with old age. Another area for exploration is how perceived agedness affects other geopolitical contexts, such as relations among belligerents engaged in open military conflict or domains such as trade or environmental cooperation. Such research may highlight distinct policy responses to old age; foreign interlocutors may keep policy unchanged even as evidence of senility arises, hedge their bets (e.g., increase engagement with subordinates who might replace a senile incumbent), or look to exploit an aging leader in various ways. These avenues underscore the promise of a perceptual turn in the research agenda on leader attributes.

Second, our theory downplays the role of observer-specific characteristics. While the perceptions we assess largely converged, we note a dissenting voice in the Rhee case, that is, Ambassador John Muccio. Muccio’s view of Rhee as senile in the early period invites future research that unpacks how and why individuals vary in their appraisals of a given elderly leader. The specific context under which an old leader is observed could explain some divergence in perceptions. For example, Muccio spent much of his ambassadorial tenure during the Korean War, which may have disproportionately exposed him to Rhee in his stressed and fatigued states. Dispositional differences, such as “causal beliefs” about the effects of aging informed by past experiences, may matter as well.²³ Future research should therefore examine how contextual and dispositional factors condition appraisals of elderly leaders among foreign observers.

Finally, as noted in our theoretical discussion, we find preliminary evidence that other stereotypes—including race or gender—shape how age is understood. Racialized interpretations often accompany age-specific clues, as in Kissinger’s invocation of the Orientalist trope of Confucian philosopher kings when he referred to Mao as “the philosopher, the poet, the grand strategist, the inspirer, the romantic” (Kissinger 1972). A growing body of research also shows that gender stereotypes affect how leaders are seen and treated in international politics (e.g., Naurin, Naurin, and Alexander 2019; Post and Sen 2020; Schramm and Stark 2020; Schwartz and Blair 2020). Studies in gerontology also

suggest the gendered nature of some elderly stereotypes, as in the existence of a “liberal matriarch” stereotype in some cultures (Hummert 1990). Future research should explore how aging intersects with race, gender, and other identity categories in the perception process.

Our findings also have important practical implications. Some apply to observers of foreign leaders. Policymakers should be wary of how biases and motivated reasoning can distort their assessments of elderly leaders in foreign countries. This, in turn, underscores the importance of face-to-face meetings for vetting prevailing views about foreign leaders. Other implications apply to the elderly leaders themselves. Our study shows how and why performances in face-to-face settings matter. Had Syngman Rhee displayed the vigor and wit of earlier years when meeting his American partners in the late 1950s, they may not have been as quick to conclude that his agency had dissipated. In a United States led by an elderly president and, more broadly, increasingly resembling a “gerontocracy,” our findings highlight the value of carefully managing high-level meetings with foreign counterparts. Well-designed talking points and meeting protocols can give older leaders the opportunity to showcase their mental acuity, physical vigor, and independence. Age may indeed be “just a number” in the self-image of an elderly leader. However, as far as others are concerned, seeing is believing.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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²³ On the role of causal beliefs, see Saunders (2011) and Whitdark (2021).

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