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**Geography, Power and Ideology: Diplomatic Representation  
in a Spatial, Unequal and Divided World**

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**Abstract**

*Sending diplomatic missions abroad and receiving foreign missions at home is in the political and economic interest of countries. But such missions depend on domestic and foreign political will and they also cost scarce resources. This article demonstrates that the global pattern of diplomatic representation is significantly determined by geographical distance between countries, by the power of both sending and recipient countries and by the degree of their ideological affinity. The pattern of diplomatic representation is both a reflection of and a contributor to the spatially shaped and ideologically divided world of unequal power we live in.*

**Key words:** diplomacy, diplomatic missions, embassies, geographical distance, power, ideological affinity

## **Introduction**

Diplomatic representation serves an important function in the international system of nation-states. While diplomacy can be achieved by means other than diplomatic representation, the presence of an ambassador or chargé d'affaires greatly facilitates 'the management of relations between states and between states and other actors' Barston (2006: 1). Through diplomatic representation states promote their political and economic interests, they negotiate, co-ordinate and solve problems, they gather information that is not otherwise publicly available, they convey messages to foreign representatives, protect their own citizens, facilitate scientific and tourist exchange and do many other things more. Hosting diplomatic representations by foreign nations in one's own country is generally not any less important than establishing one's diplomatic representation abroad. In fact, Small and Singer (1973) take the number of diplomatic missions present in a country's capital as a measure of the present recognised relative importance of a state in the international system and a cause of its relative importance in the future.

Considering the importance of one's own diplomatic representations abroad and foreign representations at home, one may think that all countries would set up such representation in all other countries of the world. The reality, however, looks very different. Only about one third of all possible directed country pairs show evidence of diplomatic representation in the period after the Second World War. Even historically, this rate has rarely been above 50 per cent (as in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), despite the international system containing far fewer sovereign nation states back then.

Hence, the question is why states choose to set up diplomatic representation in some foreign countries, but not in others. And why are some nation-states much more

represented abroad than others? Similarly, why do some nation-states host many more foreign representations at home than others? Figure 1 gives a graphic representation of the number of diplomatic missions sent and received of all countries in the world for the year 2005.

There is a surprising gap in the geographical and international relations literature on what accounts for the large variation in diplomatic representation exemplified by figure 1. Russett and Lamb (1969), Small and Singer (1973), Johns (1979), Nierop (1994) and Vogeler (1995) are examples of studies providing anecdotal or more systematic evidence short of multivariate quantitative analysis. Xierali and Liu (2006) study the size of foreign diplomatic presence as measured by the number of diplomats in multivariate analysis, but only for embassies accredited in the United States and for one single year only.

This article will study bilateral patterns of diplomatic representation over the period 1970 to 2005. I argue that three factors exert a strong influence on this pattern: geography, power and ideology. Nation-states are much more likely to send an ambassador or chargé d'affaires to a country that is geographically close. Countries that are more economically and militarily powerful send and receive more diplomatic representations than less powerful countries. And, finally, countries that are ideologically close to each other are much more likely to enjoy diplomatic exchange.

In the remainder of this article, I first discuss the importance of diplomatic representation. I suggest cost, political will of the potential sending state and the veto right of the potential recipient states as obstacles to ubiquitous diplomatic representation and identify geographical proximity, power and ideological affinity as important determinants of the costs and benefits of representation. This is followed by

the presentation of multivariate regression results, robustness tests and the concluding section.

### **The Importance of Diplomatic Representation**

Modern diplomacy is as old as the modern international system of sovereign states itself, with the first permanent mission having been established by the Duke of Milan at Genoa in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Alger and Brams 1966). The nature and role of diplomatic representation has changed much during the course of history. The promotion of economic interests as well as the protection of one's citizens travelling or living abroad has gained greatly in importance, whereas more traditional functions such as the diffusion of security threats and of military tensions have been taken over to some extent by the more direct involvement of heads of state and foreign ministers (Barston 2006).

Diplomatic representation is particularly important for the promotion of one's trade interests. Already in 1980, Alan James (1980: 938) noted 'that many embassies spend much of their time on export promotion'. Since then, if anything, this role has become more important still. Empirical studies have found that diplomatic exchange has a major impact on commercial exchange between countries. Stated succinctly, trade follows the flag (Pollins 1989; Rose 2007).

Critics have argued that the importance of diplomatic exchange is either over-rated or at least declining over time. For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued in 1970 that if foreign ministries and embassies 'did not already exist, they surely would not have to be invented' (cited in Hamilton and Langhorne 1995: 232). James (1980: 933) quotes a former ambassador to Britain as saying that ambassadors and embassies 'are obsolescent and, if things continue as they are (...) will rapidly become obsolete'.

Modern communication technology may have indeed rendered some of the communication and information gathering functions of diplomatic representations less pertinent (Barston 2006). However, the enduring reality of diplomatic exchange demonstrates that nation-states continue to appreciate its importance. In fact, as Hamilton and Langhorne (1995: 233) have pointed out, countries rarely break off diplomatic relations, close down embassies or downgrade them to mere consulates other than temporarily, even after revolutionary regime changes at home. The reason is simple: ‘In truth, there are few satisfactory alternatives to the resident envoy’ (ibid.).

The very fact that countries use the, often temporary, severing of diplomatic ties as a means to communicate an important and strong message to the targeted state serves to demonstrate the enduring importance of diplomatic exchange.<sup>1</sup> Even in the case of temporary or more permanent embassy closure friendly embassies are frequently asked to host an interest section where diplomats – other than the ambassador – from the closed embassy continue to work in the interest of the country (Watson 1984). As Berridge (1994: 38ff.) points out, such interest sections are, however, no real substitute for having one’s own embassy. Hence, states are typically eager to renew their diplomatic exchange as soon as the temporary period of severance has passed.

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<sup>1</sup> As Berridge (1994: 7f.) points out the use of severing diplomatic ties as a signalling device was traditionally used as a prelude to war. Nowadays, it is used as a device to send strong signals of dissatisfaction without necessarily any military intentions.

## **Obstacles to Diplomatic Representation**

Given the importance of diplomatic representation, why is it not ubiquitous? There are three main reasons why a state may not be diplomatically present in all foreign countries. One is cost, one is lack of political will, while the third is the veto right of the receiving state. Starting with the first reason, the setting up and maintenance of diplomatic representations create both capital and current costs. In addition, such representations need to be staffed by diplomatic personnel that speak the local language and are willing to live in a certain foreign country for a number of years.

Yet, even if diplomatic representation abroad were costless, countries would not *want* to open embassies in every other country. Domestic opposition or foreign pressure may prevent a country from being represented in a foreign country, usually because of ideological reasons. For example, before Nixon went to China and thus paved the way for the establishment of an American embassy in Beijing, domestic anti-communist opposition prevented American presidents from doing so and likewise American pressure on some of its foreign allies prevented them from exchanging diplomatic relations with China. Opening diplomatic representation in one country can also mean losing it in another. For example, the price for diplomatic relations with mainland China is always the loss, if existent, of relations with Taiwan.

While cost considerations and lack of political will in the sending country imply that not all countries would *want* to be diplomatically represented in all other countries, political considerations in the recipient state imply that not all countries would be *able* to open embassies in every other country, even if they could afford and wanted to do so. This is because the receiving state can discourage diplomatic representation of a particular foreign state in its own country. In its most extreme form, it can even refuse to recognise the state that is eager to establish a diplomatic

representation. Whilst generally rather uncommon, some states such as Israel, North Korea and Taiwan or, in the past, Rhodesia and East Germany suffered from more or less widespread refusal to recognise its status as an independent, sovereign nation-state. States that struggle for recognition often use economic incentives to induce foreign countries to exchange diplomatic representation. Others, particularly so states, which compete with them for diplomatic recognition (such as Western Germany and South Korea in the past and China up to this day), use such incentives to dissuade these same countries from doing so (Newnham 2000). But even if countries formally recognise each other, they can still signal that the establishment of a formal diplomatic representation is unwanted. This forces interested foreign states to either open consulates instead, which are usually constrained to perform some low-key administrative tasks and are thus no rival to the multiple functions of embassies (Berridge 1994), or not to be represented at all. As James (1980: 940) points out ‘an embassy is, literally and figuratively, showing the flag’ and some flags are *non grata* in certain foreign countries.

In one way or another, there are therefore costs and benefits to both sending and recipient states considering to open diplomatic representation in each other’s country. The costs need to be balanced against the benefits and the benefit-cost ratio will be influenced by both factors of the sending state and the potential recipient state as well as the relations between them. The benefit-cost ratio will also change over time. There is, however, a certain path-dependency in diplomatic representation over time – once established, diplomatic representations may persist despite the costs growing larger than the benefits. For example, MacRae (1989) attributes the large number of diplomatic representations in London partly to such persistence, which perpetuates the effect of Britain’s imperial heritage on its current relations. However, the verdict of

Small and Singer (1973: 582) still holds true: 'In one way or another, every government is faced periodically with the need to estimate, or re-estimate, how "important" it is to exchange missions with every other one in the system.' Nolan (1994: 66) similarly argues that patterns of diplomatic representation 'reflect deliberate political action' and that diplomatic presence is 'an indication of the salience between partners exceeding a certain minimum threshold'.

### **The Costs and Benefits of Diplomatic Representation**

What then determines the costs and benefits of diplomatic representation? This article argues that geographical distance, ideological affinity and power status play important roles. Countries that are located close to each other typically share many interests and are characterised by a high level of mutual interaction. There is often a high degree of economic exchange and travel between geographically close countries. Even if geographically proximate countries wanted to, it would be very difficult to be indifferent to each other. For these reasons, geographical proximity raises the benefits from diplomatic representation. It also lowers the cost. It is cheaper to set up and maintain embassies in close countries and easier to persuade staff to move to such countries, where the climate and culture is similar and home with all its amenities (food, media, schools for the children etc.) is not far away.

One of the functions of diplomatic representation is to maintain and foster friendly relations between states. Ideological affinity typically leads to friendly relations as sharing a particular view of the world generates a sense of belonging to the same group. For example, Western countries share similar views on democracy and human rights. Communist countries used to have similar ideas about state ownership of the means of production. Predominantly Muslim countries share similar

ideas about the role of religion in politics. Ideological affinity thus raises the benefits of diplomatic representation and promises its smooth functioning given the friendly relations it is supposed to maintain, thus also lowering the costs of representation.

The more powerful countries are the more they wish to be recognized as such by other countries. Being represented in a large number of foreign countries as well as hosting a large number of foreign countries' embassies in one's own country symbolises and represents power. However, diplomatic representation goes far beyond the symbolic. If power means exerting an influence on the political, economic and military affairs of other countries, then diplomatic representation is an important vehicle with which more powerful countries transmit, project and impose their power on foreign countries. Conversely, more powerful countries are more interesting hosts to foreign countries for their diplomatic representation abroad. It facilitates access to those who matter in international affairs.

Power also qualifies the impact of ideological affinity on diplomatic representation. Ideologically close countries share common interests and are therefore more likely to exchange diplomatic relations. However, countries with different views cannot be simply ignored if they are powerful. Take the relations between Western and Communist countries during the Cold War as an example. Smaller Western countries may not have had an incentive to send diplomatic relations to smaller Communist countries, and vice versa. However, they could not ignore the big players in the other camp. Diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and China were vital for Western countries, powerful or not, while such relations with the United States, the United Kingdom, France and perhaps Germany were important even to the less powerful Communist countries. Conversely, the big players on either side of the iron curtain needed to maintain diplomatic relations with countries of the other side,

powerful or not, to assert their power status. Where lack of ideological affinity meets with a high power status of either the sending or the receiving country, the primary functions of diplomatic representation can also become different. Embassies from former Communist countries in Western countries, and vice versa, served not least intelligence-gathering functions during the Cold War (Nolan 1994: 66).

In general, there is a very high degree of reciprocity in diplomatic representation. In about 90 per cent of dyads during the period of our study, a pair of countries had either no representation in either one or both were represented in each other's country. However, some countries receive or send many more diplomatic representations than they send or receive, respectively. For example, during the period of our study, Belgium, Luxembourg, Kenya and Ethiopia have received many more missions than they have sent abroad. Belgium is attractive because it is a major host of international organisations at which countries want to be represented. Kenya is a major aid recipient, location of Western tourism and host to the only significant United Nations organization located outside developed countries. At the other end of the spectrum are countries like the two Korean states, which compete for diplomatic recognition and are therefore keen to send missions abroad even if the host country does not reciprocate. Interestingly, some of the more powerful nations such as China, India and Brazil also send more representations abroad than they receive.

### **Empirical Analysis**

Our dependent variable is a directed dyadic dichotomous variable that is set to one if there is evidence of the potential sending country having sent either a chargé d'affaires, a minister or ambassador to the potential receiving country, and zero otherwise. Chargé d'affaires and ministers were more commonly used in the past; in

recent decades ambassadors have become the norm of diplomatic representation. Interest sections maintained by other embassies and mere consulate-generals are not counted as diplomatic representation and are thus coded as zero. The data have been collected by Bayer (2006) and exist for every five-year period between 1970 and 2005.<sup>2</sup> Due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, we use a logit estimator (probit leads to very similar results). The observations are clustered at the dyadic level to ensure that the estimations are robust to both arbitrary heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation.

Our main explanatory concepts are distance, power and ideology. The first is measured by the air distance between the capital cities of the two countries, with data taken from Bennett and Stam (2003). To capture the power dimension, we take the first principal component of a measure of military and of economic power. Military power is measured by the widely used Composite Index of National Capacity (CINC) score, taken from the Correlates of War project, first pioneered by Singer, Bremer and Stuckey (1972). A country's CINC score is a composite measure of its total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military expenditure. Economic power is approximated by the natural log of a country's total GDP in constant US\$, with data taken from Maddison (2007).

Ideological affinity cannot be measured directly. As a proxy for it, we use Gartzke's (2006) affinity of nations index. The index is based on voting behaviour in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. It is based on a conceptualisation of two political positions as falling within a space defined by all the possible political

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<sup>2</sup> From 1985, the data only count diplomatic representation if the ambassador or equivalent is physically resident in the recipient country, whereas before he or she could also reside in neighbouring countries. Results are not affected by restricting the sample to the period 1985 to 2005 only.

positions. The index is constructed such that the affinity between any two nations at any point in time falls in the interval from -1 to 1, where -1 means that two political positions are as far apart in the space as possible (complete dissimilarity, i.e. voting contrary in each instance) and 1 means that the two political positions are identical (complete similarity, i.e. voting identically in each instance). Gartzke (2006) argues that because of the often symbolic nature of UN General Assembly votes, such voting behaviour provides a good approximation to revealed state preferences and the voting similarity thus offers a good approximation to ideological affinity. It is of course not a perfect measure, but it is consistent with basic a priori expectations about the ideological affinity of nations. For example, during the Cold War period Western and Communist states voting behaviour was quite dissimilar, whereas the voting amongst the respective allies was quite similar. To account for our theoretical argument that ideological affinity only plays a role if the potential receiving or sending countries are not very powerful, we interact the power variables with the ideological affinity variable.

In terms of control variables, we include the per capita income of both sending and receiving states (data from Maddison 2007). Richer sending countries are in a better position to afford diplomatic representation abroad. Richer receiving countries are of potential greater interest to sending countries. Second, in an early contribution, Brams (1966) suggested that, besides geographical proximity, colonial ties play an important role in patterns of diplomatic exchange. We include a dummy variable to account for former colonial links between states, also counting the link between the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union republics as this amounts to a quasi-former colonial relationship. Data are taken from Neumayer (2003). Third, due to inertia and persistence in the system of diplomatic representation, countries which

have been independent for a longer period of time can be expected to have generated a greater number of representations over time, both abroad and domestically. To control for this possibility, we include the year of independence of both sending and receiving states, with data taken from Gleditsch and Ward (1999). Finally, to account for common time trends affecting all countries' propensity to send or receive diplomatic representation equally, we include period-specific time dummies in the estimations. Table 1 provides descriptive statistical information on the variables.

## **Results**

Table 2 presents the estimation results. As expected, geographical distance matters: more proximate countries are more likely to open a diplomatic representation than more distant countries. Also in line with theory, the power status of both sending and recipient country exert a significantly positive effect on the likelihood of diplomatic presentation. More powerful countries are both more likely to send missions abroad and more likely to receive missions. The former effect is slightly stronger, but the confidence intervals of the two estimated coefficients overlap, so the difference is not statistically significant. Ideological affinity makes diplomatic representation more likely. However, as expected, the negative coefficients of the interaction effects between power of both sending and recipient states and their degree of affinity suggests that the positive effect of ideological affinity is decreasing as the power of either recipient or sending states increases. In fact, whereas the probability of having a diplomatic representation in a country of average power goes down by .05 as ideological affinity goes down from average to minimum, holding all other variables at their mean, there is no negative effect of decreasing ideological affinity for a very

powerful potential recipient country.<sup>3</sup> A very similar result holds true for power status of a potential sending country. What this means is that ideological affinity has a positive effect on the likelihood of diplomatic representation as long as neither the potential sending nor the potential recipient state is very powerful.

As for the control variables, GDP per capita in both sending and recipient countries exerts a positive influence on the likelihood of diplomatic representation, as expected. The confidence intervals overlap, so there is no statistically significant difference between the two variables. Former colonial ties do not have a statistically significant effect on patterns of diplomatic representation. The pseudo  $R^2$  of the model is 0.29, which is relatively high, suggesting that the model provides a relatively good fit to the pattern of diplomatic representation. About 81 per cent of observations are correctly classified. That is, for about 8 out of 10 observations the model correctly predicts the presence or absence of diplomatic representation.

In column II, we add a dummy variable for diplomatic representation of the potential receiving country in the potential sending country. In other words, it is set to one if the potential receiving country has itself established a diplomatic mission in the potential sending country, and zero otherwise. This variable is a-theoretical, but it can control for the very strong degree of reciprocity in diplomatic relations, which, as mentioned already, is close to 90 per cent. Naturally, the coefficient of this variable is highly statistically significant and it pushes the Pseudo  $R^2$  up to 0.5. About 88 per cent of observations are now correctly classified. Interestingly, despite absorbing an enormous amount of variation in the data, the results from column I nevertheless by and large uphold. In particular, geographical distance and power status still matter,

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<sup>3</sup> This cannot be directly observed from the estimation results presented in table 2, but can be derived from predicted values.

even though the respective sizes of the coefficients change of course. The ideological affinity variable becomes marginally insignificant and its interaction with power of the potential sending country more clearly insignificant.

### **Robustness tests**

Our main result – that the pattern of diplomatic representation is largely shaped by geographical proximity, power and ideological affinity – is robust to a number of alterations to the model. First, it is robust to adding further explanatory variables. For example, bilateral trade between countries was not included in the estimations because the literature suggests that “trade follows the flag” rather than the other way around. However, our results are little affected if we include bilateral trade divided by the GDP of the potential sending country, which, as expected, has a positive and statistically significant coefficient sign.

Newly independent states typically rush to open diplomatic representations abroad (James 1980). As the euphoria vanishes and the budget constraints become clearer, some of these representations are closed again. If we include the year of independence of the sending country together with its squared term, then we find indeed a non-linear effect. A more recent year of independence first raises, but then decreases the likelihood of sending a diplomatic mission to the potential recipient country.

Regime type combinations may affect the pattern of diplomatic representation. If we employ the commonly used Polity IV measure of democracy, then pairs of democracies and pairs of autocracies are more likely to exchange diplomatic missions than if one of the country is democratic and the other is autocratic, the omitted

reference category. These regime type combinations are correlated with the ideological affinity variable, but nevertheless the results uphold.

Second, our main result is also robust to using a probit, random-effects logit or population-averaged logit estimator instead of the standard logit estimator with clustered standard errors. Given the high degree of persistence in diplomatic relations there is relatively little variation over time compared to the cross-dyadic variation. It is therefore not surprising that fixed-effects logit estimation is very inefficient, rendering most of the explanatory variables statistically insignificant.

## **Conclusion**

Diplomatic representation is beneficial to both sending and recipient countries. It is also costly, however, in both narrow economic and wider political terms, which prevents countries from sending missions to and receiving missions from all other countries. This study has demonstrated that the pattern of diplomatic representation is shaped to a significant extent by geographical proximity, power and ideological affinity. Yet, given its important political and economic functions, diplomatic representation in turn also reinforces the tyranny of geography, the inequality of power and the division of countries along ideological lines. The pattern of diplomatic representation is thus both a reflection of and a contributing force to the spatial, unequal and divided world we live in.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistical variable information.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dipl. representation of sending at recipient country	111705	0.327	0.469	0	1
ln Distance	111705	8.254	0.704	3.951	9.421
Power princ. component (recipient country)	111705	-0.100	1.022	-2.294	4.899
Power princ. component (sending country)	111705	-0.094	1.023	-2.294	4.899
Ideological affinity	111705	0.725	0.263	-0.568	1
Ideology * Power (recipient country)	111705	-0.156	0.722	-2.465	4.693
Ideology * Power (sending country))	111705	-0.150	0.725	-2.465	4.693
ln GDP per capita (recipient country)	111705	7.971	1.090	5.384	10.469
ln GDP per capita (sending country)	111705	7.971	1.089	5.384	10.469
Colonial link	111705	0.637	0.481	0	1
Dipl. representation of recipient at sending country	111705	0.327	0.469	0	1

Table 2. Estimation results.

	(1)	(2)
In Distance	-0.155 (12.36)*	-0.076 (5.03)*
Power princ. component (recipient country)	1.365 (14.80)*	0.607 (12.23)*
Power princ. component (sending country)	1.503 (14.53)*	0.803 (12.54)*
Ideological affinity	0.190 (3.06)*	0.093 (1.38)
Ideology * Power (recipient country)	-0.466 (4.07)*	-0.168 (2.67)*
Ideology * Power (sending country))	-0.454 (3.54)*	0.025 (0.31)
In GDP per capita (recipient country)	0.194 (11.00)*	0.147 (7.63)*
In GDP per capita (sending country)	0.155 (8.90)*	0.061 (3.35)*
Colonial link	0.006 (0.36)	0.011 (0.55)
Dipl. representation of recipient at sending country		3.183 (99.85)*
Constant	-2.117 (8.07)*	-2.979 (10.19)*
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.29	0.50
Correctly classified	80.6%	87.8%
# countries	155	155
Observations (country dyads)	111705	111705

Note: Logit estimation with standard errors clustered on country dyads. Period-specific time dummies included, but coefficients not reported. Absolute z-statistics in parentheses.

\* statistically significant at .01 level.

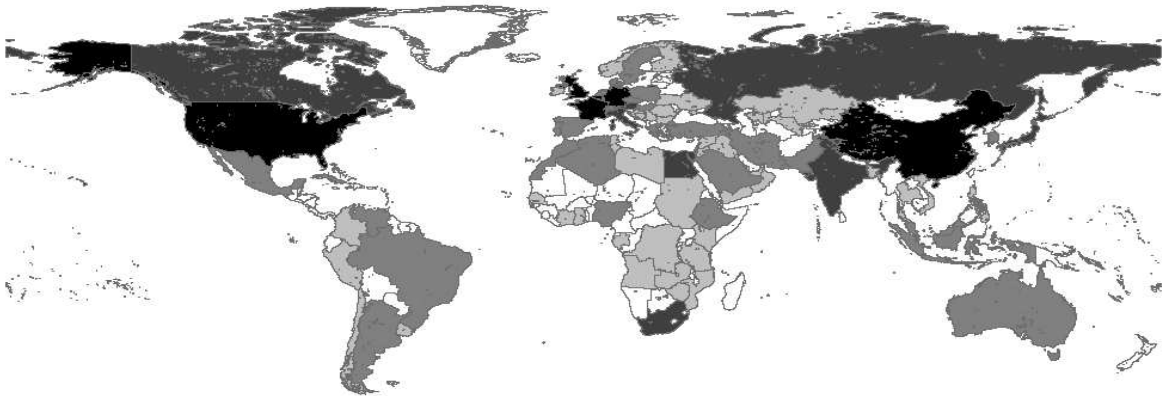
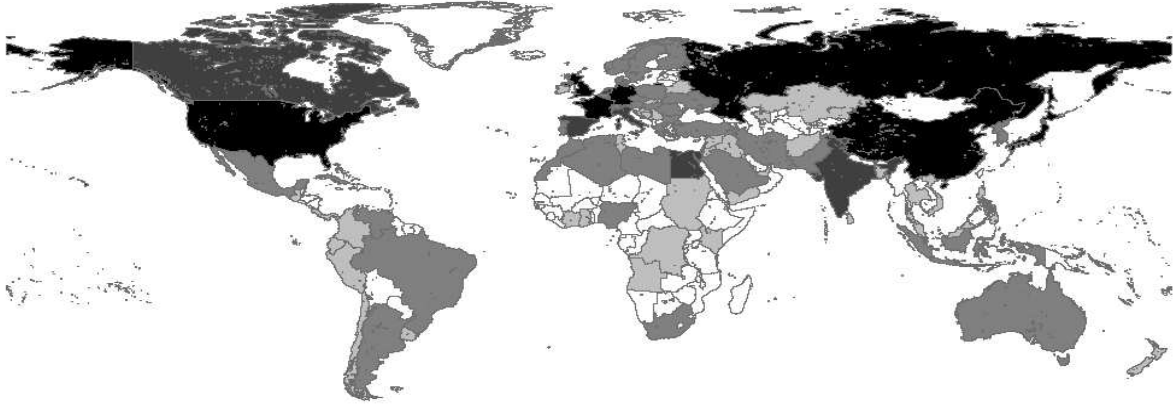


Figure 1. Diplomatic missions sent to (top panel) and received from other countries (bottom panel) in 2005. Note: darker colours represent higher numbers (divided into five equal intervals each).