

# Presidents as Peacocks: Projection of State Power and Status in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

This article examines the parallels between biological signaling theory and contemporary presidential power projection, arguing that modern heads of state engage in costly signaling behaviors analogous to peacock displays. Drawing from evolutionary biology, international relations theory, semiotics, and behavioral economics, we analyze how 21st-century presidents deploy symbolic displays, military demonstrations, and architectural grandeur to communicate state capacity and deter rivals. The handicap principle—where costly signals reliably indicate quality—provides a theoretical framework for understanding summit theatrics, military parades, and infrastructure megaprojects as credible commitments to power. We synthesize evidence from recent geopolitical events to demonstrate that peacock-ing remains a central feature of statecraft in an era of information warfare and asymmetric conflict.

The paper ends with “The End”

## 1 Introduction

The male peacock’s elaborate tail represents one of nature’s most iconic examples of costly signaling. Despite hindering mobility and attracting predators, this ornamental display evolved because it credibly communicates genetic fitness to potential mates. Amotz Zahavi’s handicap principle posits that signals must be costly to remain honest: only genuinely fit individuals can afford such extravagant displays [1].

Modern presidential behavior exhibits striking parallels to this biological phenomenon. From Vladimir Putin’s bare-chested horseback rides to Donald Trump’s gold-plated penthouse, from Xi Jinping’s massive military parades to Emmanuel Macron’s Versailles state dinners, contemporary leaders invest enormous resources in symbolic displays that communicate state power, personal authority, and national prestige. These behaviors, superficially dismissed as vanity or propaganda, actually constitute rational strategies within a competitive international system where perceptions of power shape diplomatic outcomes, alliance formations, and crisis stability.

This article advances three core arguments. First, presidential power projection in the 21st century follows the logic of costly signaling theory, where displays must be resource-intensive to credibly communicate state capacity. Second, different regime types deploy distinct signaling strategies reflecting their domestic political constraints and

international positioning. Third, the effectiveness of peacocking depends on audience interpretation—signals that resonate domestically may backfire internationally, and vice versa.

## 2 Theoretical Framework: From Plumage to Power

### 2.1 The Handicap Principle in Biology and Beyond

Zahavi’s handicap principle revolutionized understanding of animal communication by solving a fundamental puzzle: why would evolution favor traits that decrease survival probability? The answer lies in signal reliability. Cheap signals can be easily faked, rendering them worthless for decision-making. Costly signals, by contrast, provide reliable information because only high-quality individuals possess sufficient resources to bear the expense [2].

The principle extends beyond sexual selection to encompass threat displays, territorial marking, and alarm calls across species. Crucially, it has been formalized mathematically through game-theoretic models demonstrating that separating equilibria emerge when signal costs correlate negatively with individual quality—the strong can afford displays that would bankrupt the weak.

### 2.2 Costly Signaling in Human Societies

Anthropologists and economists have documented costly signaling across human cultures. Religious rituals requiring sacrifice, conspicuous consumption among elites, extreme sports participation, and even higher education credentials all function as costly signals of commitment, wealth, or ability [3]. The common thread: costs separate genuine from counterfeit signals.

In international relations, costly signaling theory explains phenomena from military buildups to diplomatic summits. States face credibility problems when attempting to communicate resolve, capabilities, or intentions. Cheap talk fails because adversaries assume self-interested misrepresentation. Actions that impose significant costs—mobilizing troops, severing economic ties, or initiating limited military strikes—carry greater informational content [4].

### 2.3 Presidential Peacocking: A Synthesis

We define presidential peacocking as the strategic deployment of costly, highly visible displays intended to signal state power, regime legitimacy, or personal authority to domestic and international audiences. These displays share four characteristics:

1. **Resource Intensity:** They consume significant financial, political, or reputational capital.
2. **Visibility:** They generate widespread media coverage and public attention.
3. **Symbolic Loading:** They carry layered meanings beyond their immediate material content.
4. **Competitive Context:** They occur within rivalrous environments where relative standing matters.

The costly nature of these displays ensures credibility. A weak state cannot sustain frequent military parades without depleting defense readiness. A domestically vulnerable leader cannot host lavish summits without risking populist backlash. An economically stagnant regime cannot erect architectural monuments without revealing resource misallocation. The very expense serves as proof of capacity.

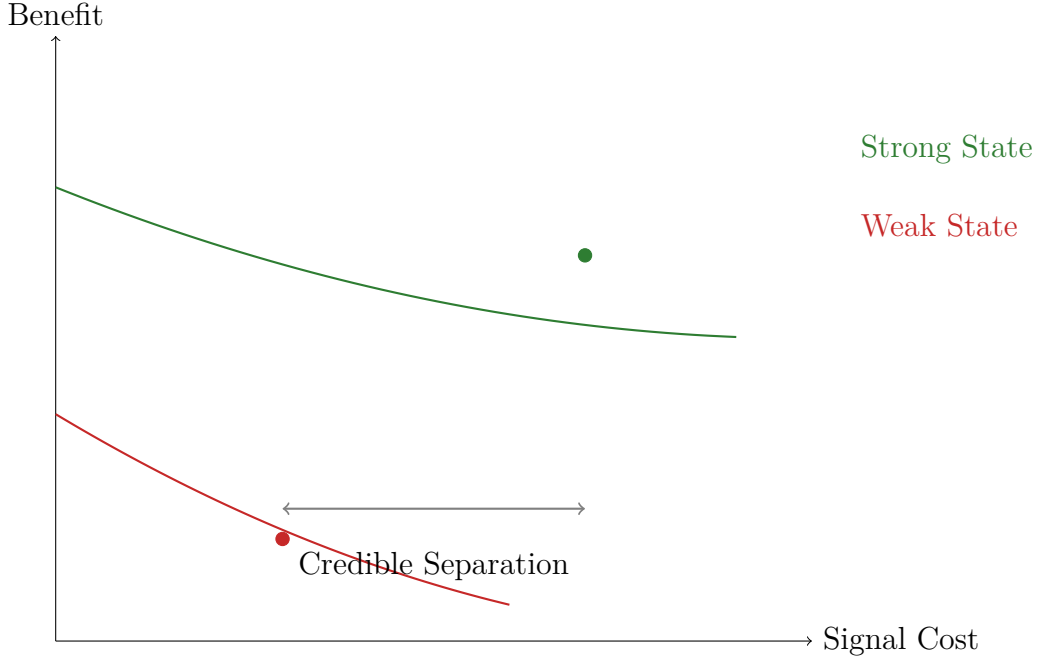


Figure 1: Costly Signaling Equilibrium: Strong states sustain expensive displays that credibly separate them from weak states.

### 3 Typology of Presidential Peacocking

Presidential displays manifest across multiple dimensions. We identify five primary categories, each with distinct strategic logics and empirical exemplars.

#### 3.1 Military Demonstrations

Military parades, weapons tests, and troop deployments serve as classic peacocking mechanisms. China’s 2019 National Day parade showcased hypersonic missiles and stealth drones, signaling technological advancement to regional rivals and domestic audiences alike. Russia’s annual Victory Day parades display armor and aircraft in Red Square, evoking Soviet grandeur while demonstrating current military inventory. North Korea’s frequent missile tests impose economic costs but communicate resolve and technical capacity despite international sanctions.

These displays differ from operational military readiness. Resources devoted to parade preparation and public spectacle divert from combat effectiveness. The willingness to accept this trade-off signals confidence in baseline military adequacy—only states secure in their defensive capabilities can afford theatrical demonstrations.

### 3.2 Architectural Monumentalism

Grand construction projects function as durable signals of state capacity and ideological permanence. Egypt’s New Administrative Capital, a \$58 billion undertaking, projects national ambition and governmental competence. Turkey’s vast presidential palace complex in Ankara symbolizes centralized authority and neo-Ottoman aspirations. Kazakhstan’s capital relocation to Astana (now Nur-Sultan) involved futuristic architecture signaling modernity and regime consolidation.

Unlike military displays, architectural peacocking creates lasting physical artifacts that outlive individual leaders. This permanence raises signal costs—a failed monument becomes a visible testament to overreach and incompetence. Consequently, successful completion credibly demonstrates organizational capacity and economic surplus.

### 3.3 Summit Theatrics

Diplomatic summits offer stages for competitive signaling through venue selection, ceremonial choreography, and bilateral optics. The 2018 Trump-Kim Singapore summit exemplified this dynamic: unprecedented pageantry surrounding a meeting between adversaries signaled mutual recognition and elevated North Korea’s international standing. Putin’s hosting of the 2014 Sochi Olympics despite massive cost overruns demonstrated willingness to expend resources on prestige projects. Modi’s “Howdy, Modi!” rally in Houston showcased diaspora influence and soft power projection.

Summit peacocking operates through multiple channels: lavish hospitality signals wealth, high-level attendance signals diplomatic clout, media saturation signals agenda-setting power. The strategic calculation weighs symbolic gains against risks of diplomatic failure or public-relations disasters.

### 3.4 Personal Branding and Lifestyle Display

Individual leaders cultivate personalized power symbols through carefully curated public images. Putin’s action-man persona (judo, hunting, shirtless horseback riding) projects vitality and masculinity. Trump’s gold-adorned aesthetic communicated wealth and success before and during his presidency. Zelensky’s wartime casual attire signals solidarity with fighting troops. Macron’s intellectual sophistication and cultural refinement evoke French grandeur.

These personal displays differ from institutional peacocking by centering on individual attributes rather than state capabilities. They function particularly effectively in personalist regimes where leader and state identity merge. However, they risk backfiring if perceived as narcissistic or detached from citizen concerns.

### 3.5 Digital-Age Spectacles

Social media and digital platforms enable new peacocking forms. Twitter diplomacy, Instagram statecraft, and viral video campaigns allow direct communication with mass audiences. Trump’s Twitter feed bypassed traditional media gatekeepers while dominating news cycles. Zelensky’s wartime social media presence rallied international support. Bolsonaro’s Facebook Live broadcasts cultivated direct relationships with supporters.

Digital peacocking reduces costs compared to physical displays but faces credibility challenges—low barriers to entry mean signals are easier to fake or dismiss as propaganda.

Consequently, digital strategies typically complement rather than replace traditional peacocking mechanisms.

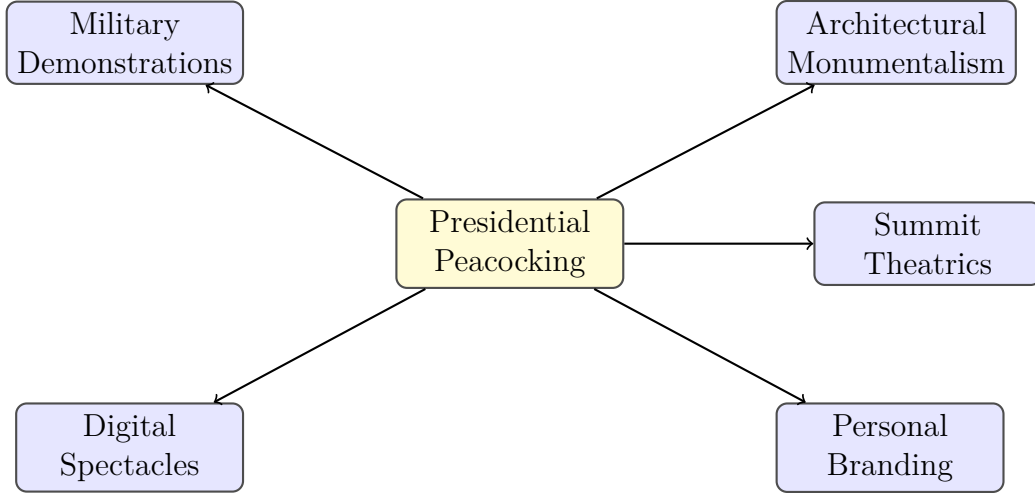


Figure 2: Five Categories of Presidential Peacocking in Contemporary Statecraft

## 4 Regime Type and Signaling Strategy

Different political systems face distinct domestic constraints and international incentives that shape peacocking strategies. We identify three regime clusters with characteristic signaling patterns.

### 4.1 Autocracies and Personalist Regimes

Authoritarian leaders face credibility problems regarding regime stability and succession. Absent electoral legitimacy, they must continuously signal strength to deter coup attempts, reassure loyalists, and intimidate opposition. Consequently, autocratic peacocking tends toward grandiosity and frequency.

Putin’s Russia exemplifies this pattern: military parades, architectural projects (Crimean Bridge, World Cup stadiums), summit spectacles, and personal action-hero imagery all reinforce narratives of strength and national resurgence. Xi’s China similarly deploys military demonstrations, Belt and Road infrastructure, and elimination of term limits to signal consolidated authority.

The autocratic advantage in peacocking stems from centralized decision-making and controlled media environments. Democratic accountability constraints and budget transparency requirements that limit democratic leaders pose fewer obstacles in authoritarian contexts. However, autocrats face higher risks if displays fail—visible incompetence or resource waste can trigger elite defection or popular unrest.

### 4.2 Democracies and Electoral Politics

Democratic leaders must balance international signaling with domestic political calculations. Excessive peacocking risks populist backlash over wasteful spending, while insufficient displays may signal weakness abroad. This tension generates distinctive democratic signaling patterns.

Trump’s presidency demonstrated democratic peacocking constraints: his penchant for military parades and lavish displays met resistance from defense officials and fiscal conservatives. Macron’s Versailles reception for Putin drew criticism as tone-deaf extravagance. These episodes illustrate how democratic institutions and media scrutiny impose costs on peacocking that autocrats avoid.

Conversely, democracies excel at leveraging soft power peacocking: hosting international summits (G7, climate conferences), showcasing cultural achievements, and projecting normative leadership. These strategies align with domestic values while signaling influence and legitimacy internationally.

### **4.3 Hybrid Regimes and Competitive Authoritarianism**

Hybrid regimes combine authoritarian power concentration with formal democratic institutions. Leaders like Erdogan, Modi, and Orban occupy an intermediate position, exploiting state resources for peacocking while maintaining electoral facades.

These leaders deploy peacocking aggressively to consolidate power: Erdogan’s palace complex, Modi’s mass rallies, Orban’s stadium construction programs all signal dominance while testing institutional constraints. The hybrid context enables more grandiose displays than consolidated democracies allow but carries greater risks than closed autocracies face if displays fail or provoke opposition mobilization.

## **5 Audience Effects and Strategic Misfires**

Peacocking effectiveness depends critically on audience interpretation. Signals that successfully intimidate rivals may alienate allies. Displays that rally domestic support may undermine international legitimacy. We examine three dimensions of audience effects.

### **5.1 Domestic versus International Reception**

Military parades illustrate divergent audience effects. Domestically, they cultivate nationalist pride and regime legitimacy. Internationally, they may be read as aggressive posturing or compensatory behavior masking weakness. North Korea’s missile tests rally internal support through defiance narratives but reinforce international isolation.

Summit theatrics face similar tensions. Lavish hospitality impresses domestic audiences but may appear wasteful or desperate to foreign observers. The Trump-Kim summit elevated North Korea’s status regionally but generated skepticism about substantive outcomes in Western capitals.

### **5.2 Cultural and Contextual Interpretation**

Peacocking resonates differently across cultural contexts. Ostentatious displays signaling strength in some cultures may be perceived as vulgar or insecure elsewhere. Gold-plated luxury communicates success in certain contexts but appears gauche in others. Personal bravado reads as confidence or compensation depending on audience expectations.

These cultural variations complicate international signaling. Leaders must calibrate displays for multiple audiences with divergent interpretative frameworks. Putin’s shirtless horseback riding projects masculinity domestically but invites mockery internationally.

Trump’s gilded aesthetic signaled business success to American supporters but reinforced European elite skepticism.

### **5.3 The Bluffing Problem**

Costly signaling theory assumes costs reliably indicate quality. However, leaders may attempt to bluff—undertaking displays beyond their true capacity hoping to deter challenges before exposure. North Korea’s nuclear program exemplifies this dynamic: massive resource diversion to weapons development signals commitment but imposes costs that weaken the regime in other dimensions.

Bluffing creates asymmetric information problems. Adversaries must assess whether displays represent genuine capacity or desperate posturing. Miscalculation risks escalation when bluffs are called. The peacock’s tail cannot be fully faked, but presidential displays offer more scope for deception through staging, propaganda, and selective transparency.

## **6 Case Studies in 21st Century Peacocking**

### **6.1 Putin’s Russia: Civilizational Grandeur**

Vladimir Putin has orchestrated sustained peacocking across his tenure, constructing a narrative of Russian resurgence after post-Soviet humiliation. The 2014 Sochi Olympics (\$51 billion, the most expensive ever) signaled return to great power status despite economic sanctions. The 2018 World Cup reinforced this message through successful hosting and stadium infrastructure.

Military peacocking intensified after 2014: intervention in Syria demonstrated power projection capabilities, while weapons unveilings (hypersonic missiles, nuclear-powered cruise missiles, underwater drones) showcased technological advancement. The rhetoric explicitly frames these displays in civilizational terms—Russia as a unique pole in a multipolar world.

Putin’s personal branding complements state-level signaling: judo black belt credentials, wildlife photography, historical erudition, and physical fitness displays construct an image of masculine competence. These efforts target both domestic audiences (cultivating strongman legitimacy) and international rivals (projecting resolve and capability).

The Ukraine invasion represents peacocking’s risks: military displays convinced Putin of Russian superiority, contributing to miscalculation about invasion feasibility. Early setbacks revealed gaps between peacock display and operational reality, demonstrating how excessive confidence in signaling can produce catastrophic misjudgments.

### **6.2 Trump’s America: Personalist Disruption**

Donald Trump brought unprecedented personal peacocking to the U.S. presidency. His pre-political brand centered on wealth display: gold-plated apartments, luxury hotels, reality television stardom. This aesthetic translated to presidential behavior: preferences for military parades, fascination with dictatorial displays, transactional diplomacy centered on personal relationships.

Trump’s peacocking diverged from traditional American presidential norms emphasizing restraint and institutional legitimacy. Instead, he deployed direct communication

(Twitter), spectacle (campaign rallies), and personalist symbolism. International peacocking focused on bilateral summits as status competitions: the Trump-Kim meeting elevated both leaders through mutual recognition.

The democratic context constrained Trump's peacocking ambitions. His desire for military parades met institutional resistance. His personal branding clashed with bureaucratic norms. Media scrutiny and political opposition imposed costs absent in autocratic contexts. Nonetheless, Trump demonstrated how personalist peacocking can function even within democratic constraints by exploiting media dynamics and cultivating direct voter relationships.

### **6.3 Xi's China: Civilizational Rejuvenation**

Xi Jinping has systematically deployed peacocking to consolidate personal authority and project Chinese power. The "Chinese Dream" narrative frames displays as civilizational revival after a "century of humiliation." Military parades showcase advanced weaponry and numerically massive formations. The Belt and Road Initiative extends architectural peacocking globally through infrastructure projects signaling Chinese largesse and influence.

Personal peacocking has been more subtle but significant: elimination of term limits signals confidence in indefinite tenure, the personality cult surrounding "Xi Jinping Thought" elevates his ideological status, and carefully staged media appearances project gravitas and command. These displays target both domestic audiences (legitimizing centralized authority) and international observers (signaling stable, decisive leadership).

The COVID-19 pandemic created peacocking opportunities: China's authoritarian capacity to implement lockdowns was framed as systemic superiority over democratic "chaos." Providing medical aid internationally signaled generosity and competence. The 2022 Beijing Olympics, held despite pandemic concerns, demonstrated organizational capacity and defiance of Western criticism.

## **7 Evolutionary Dynamics and Arms Races**

Presidential peacocking exhibits evolutionary dynamics analogous to biological signaling. As rivals escalate displays, competitive pressures drive ever-more-extravagant demonstrations. This section examines the arms race logic underlying peacocking inflation.

### **7.1 Competitive Escalation**

When one state engages in successful peacocking, rivals face pressure to match or exceed those displays. China's military parade scale prompts Russian and Indian responses. Turkey's presidential palace grandeur influences regional rivals. Gulf state architectural ambitions fuel competitive construction.

This dynamic parallels the runaway selection process in biology where female preferences drive increasingly elaborate male ornaments. Each escalation raises the bar for credible signaling, requiring greater resource commitments. The result: inflation in peacocking costs over time as minimum credible displays become more expensive.



## 7.2 Diminishing Returns and Strategic Exhaustion

Escalating peacocking eventually confronts resource constraints and diminishing marginal returns. Soviet military parades grew ever more elaborate during the Cold War, but these displays could not prevent economic stagnation or eventual collapse. The peacocking itself diverted resources from productive investments, accelerating decline.

Contemporary autocracies face similar dynamics. Russia's military displays and prestige projects occur amid economic contraction and demographic decline. China's Belt and Road projects incur financial losses while signaling global influence. North Korea's weapons programs impose starvation costs on citizens. These patterns suggest peacocking can become strategically self-defeating when costs exceed sustainable levels.

## 7.3 Strategic Restraint as Counter-Signaling

Some states practice strategic restraint—deliberately eschewing ostentatious displays to signal confidence and responsibility. Norway's sovereign wealth fund avoids conspicuous spending despite massive resources. Germany's military modesty reflects historical lessons and European integration commitments. Canada's "middle power" diplomacy avoids grandiose claims while wielding disproportionate influence.

This restraint can itself function as costly signaling: only truly secure states can afford to appear modest. Counter-signaling requires confidence that restraint will not be misread as weakness. It works best for states with established reputations and alliance protections that reduce peacocking imperatives.

# 8 Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

Understanding presidential peacocking as costly signaling yields several policy insights for statesmen, analysts, and observers.

## 8.1 For Democratic Leaders

Democratic leaders should recognize peacocking's strategic functions while navigating domestic constraints. Recommendations include:

- Leverage soft power peacocking that aligns with democratic values: hosting summits, cultural diplomacy, normative leadership on global issues.
- Avoid mimicking autocratic displays that invite domestic backlash or appear incongruent with democratic norms.
- Recognize when rival peacocking represents genuine capability versus desperate bluffing—avoid escalatory responses to hollow displays.
- Maintain institutional constraints on executive peacocking to prevent personalist excess and resource misallocation.

## 8.2 For Analysts and Intelligence Communities

Intelligence analysts must distinguish signal from noise in presidential displays:

- Assess peacocking costs relative to state capacity to identify bluffing versus credible signaling.
- Track peacocking escalation as indicators of leadership insecurity or regime instability.
- Evaluate whether displays reflect genuine capability improvements or compensatory theater.
- Consider cultural and contextual factors shaping how peacocking will be received by target audiences.

## 8.3 For International Institutions

International organizations can shape peacocking dynamics through institutional design:

- Create formal venues for status recognition that channel competitive impulses into constructive engagement.
- Establish transparency mechanisms that increase peacocking costs for autocratic regimes while reducing information asymmetries.
- Promote counter-signaling norms that reward strategic restraint and cooperative behavior.
- Recognize peacocking's inevitability and design frameworks that accommodate status competition without enabling destructive escalation.

# 9 Critiques and Limitations

The peacock metaphor, while illuminating, faces several critiques that warrant acknowledgment.

## 9.1 Anthropomorphism and Teleology

Critics may object that applying biological metaphors to human behavior risks anthropomorphism and teleological reasoning. Peacocks do not consciously strategize; presidents do. Evolutionary pressures differ fundamentally from political calculations. The analogy may obscure more than it reveals by imposing biological framings on culturally constructed phenomena.

This critique has merit. We employ the peacock metaphor as a heuristic device rather than claiming literal equivalence. The mathematical structure of costly signaling theory transcends specific biological or political contexts, providing analytical purchase without requiring direct biological-political isomorphism.

## 9.2 Overdetermination and Confounding Variables

Presidential displays serve multiple functions simultaneously: domestic legitimation, international signaling, personal satisfaction, ideological expression, and more. Attributing displays solely to costly signaling logic may oversimplify complex motivations. Confounding variables complicate causal inference about whether peacocking produces claimed strategic effects.

We acknowledge this complexity. Our framework highlights signaling dimensions without claiming they exhaust presidential motivations. Peacocking coexists with other factors; the question is whether signaling logic helps explain observable patterns. The prevalence of costly displays across diverse contexts suggests signaling dynamics operate even when entangled with other motivations.

## 9.3 Normative Concerns

Some may argue that analyzing presidential peacocking risks normalizing or legitimizing wasteful displays, authoritarian grandiosity, or personalist excess. By treating peacocking as strategic rather than pathological, we might inadvertently endorse behaviors detrimental to governance and international stability.

This concern conflates positive and normative analysis. Understanding peacocking's strategic logic does not require endorsing it. Indeed, recognizing these dynamics enables more effective responses: democratic leaders can avoid escalatory traps, analysts can better assess regime intentions, and institutions can design frameworks that channel competitive impulses constructively. Normative critique requires first understanding the phenomenon being critiqued.

# 10 Conclusion: The Persistence of Peacocking

Presidential peacocking will persist as long as international politics remains anarchic and competitive. Absent a world government providing credible information about state capabilities and intentions, leaders must rely on costly signals to communicate power, resolve, and status. The peacock's tail endures because it works—reliably transmitting information that shapes mate selection. Presidential displays similarly endure because they work—shaping alliance formation, crisis stability, and strategic calculation.

The 21st century introduces new peacocking frontiers: cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, space exploration, and biotechnology all offer domains for competitive signaling. China's quantum communication satellite, SpaceX's reusable rockets, and AI achievements like AlphaGo already function as peacocking mechanisms. These technological displays will intensify as strategic competition extends into emerging domains.

Democratic societies face particular challenges navigating peacocking dynamics. Open media environments, fiscal constraints, and political accountability limit grandiose displays relative to autocratic rivals. Yet democracies possess advantages in soft power projection, alliance management, and innovation ecosystems that enable alternative signaling strategies. The optimal approach combines clear-eyed recognition of peacocking's inevitability with strategic discipline about when, how, and to what extent displays serve genuine national interests.

The peacock metaphor reminds us that ostentation serves functions beyond vanity. Those elaborate feathers exist because they communicate genuine information under con-

ditions of uncertainty. Presidential displays, however excessive or distasteful they may appear, similarly function within strategic logics that reward credible signaling. Understanding these dynamics enables wiser navigation of international politics in an era where perception shapes reality, symbols carry weight, and presidents, like peacocks, strut and display because the alternative—being overlooked or underestimated—carries costs that prudent leaders dare not bear.

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## Glossary

**Anarchic International System** A structural condition in international relations characterized by the absence of a central authority above sovereign states, forcing states to rely on self-help for security and creating incentives for power competition and signaling.

**Autocratic Peacocking** Grandiose displays of power and status by authoritarian leaders who face fewer domestic constraints on resource expenditure but higher risks if displays fail to materialize or reveal incompetence.

**Competitive Escalation** A dynamic whereby rival states engage in progressively more elaborate and costly displays to maintain credible signals of power, creating an arms race in symbolic demonstration parallel to military buildups.

**Costly Signaling Theory** A framework from evolutionary biology and economics positing that signals must impose significant costs on signalers to credibly communicate underlying quality or capability, since only genuinely fit individuals can afford expensive displays.

**Counter-Signaling** Strategic restraint whereby secure actors deliberately avoid ostentatious displays, paradoxically signaling confidence through modesty—a strategy only credible for actors with established reputations or assured positions.

**Credibility Problem** A challenge in strategic communication whereby actors attempting to convey information about their capabilities, intentions, or resolve confront audience skepticism due to incentives for misrepresentation.

**Digital Peacocking** Power projection and status signaling through social media, online platforms, and digital communications, characterized by lower barriers to entry but reduced credibility compared to physical displays.

**Handicap Principle** Zahavi's biological theory proposing that signals evolve to be costly because expenses ensure honesty—only individuals possessing genuine quality can afford handicapping displays, making such signals reliable indicators.

**Hybrid Regime Peacocking** Display strategies employed by competitive authoritarian systems that combine personalist power concentration with formal democratic institutions, enabling more aggressive peacocking than consolidated democracies but with greater risks than closed autocracies.

**Military Demonstrations** Public displays of armed forces capabilities through parades, weapons tests, or troop deployments that serve primarily symbolic signaling functions rather than operational military objectives.

**Personalist Branding** Cultivation of individual leader images through carefully curated public personas, lifestyle displays, and action imagery that merge personal and state identity, particularly prevalent in autocratic contexts.

**Presidential Peacocking** The strategic deployment of costly, highly visible displays by heads of state intended to signal power, legitimacy, or status to domestic and international audiences through mechanisms analogous to biological signaling.

**Separating Equilibrium** A game-theoretic outcome in which different types (e.g., strong versus weak states) choose distinct strategies (e.g., costly versus cheap signals) that credibly reveal their type to observers.

**Soft Power Peacocking** Status projection through cultural diplomacy, normative leadership, and institutional influence rather than military or economic displays, particularly viable for democratic states with legitimacy advantages.

**Summit Theatrics** Diplomatic meetings characterized by elaborate ceremonial staging, competitive hospitality, and symbolic choreography that serve signaling functions beyond substantive policy negotiations.

## The End