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# From Orient to Occident: Sauna diplomacy and Finland's challenge to diplomatic culture

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cac](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cac)**Bradley Reynolds** 

## Abstract

Finnish sauna diplomacy has become an increasingly popular trend on the Washington, DC, London, Brussels, and Berlin diplomatic circuits. However, this is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the sauna being considered 'Eastern' or 'oriental' by certain American and Western European diplomats during the Cold War. Over the past 15 years the Finnish state has successfully re-narrated and elevated the sauna's meaning as a diplomatic symbol, from a questionable diplomatic practice associated by some with ambiguous perceptions of Finland between East and West during the Cold War, to a symbol of Finland as a responsible member of Western international society. To help explain the success regarding changing international perceptions of the sauna as a site, a symbol, as well as a practice of Finnish diplomacy, theoretical contemplations on what is termed a diplomatic sublime are presented here. A diplomatic sublime elucidates how innovative diplomatic practices, along with presentation, or state narration of diplomatic sites and practices, can renegotiate the geographical boundaries of where certain diplomatic practices are considered appropriate and effective. This article is thus a contribution to the growing scholarly literature on diplomatic sites and diplomatic culture, which is part of the larger study of diplomacy in theory and practice.

## Keywords

diplomacy of place, sauna diplomacy, diplomatic sublime, Foreign Policy Oral History, sited diplomacy, diplomatic culture

## Introduction

Within the past two decades, Finnish diplomats have worked to install exclusive diplomatic sauna clubs in places such as Washington, DC, London, Brussels, and Berlin (Carlson, 2025; Harju, 2022; Landale, 2023; Rothwell, 2024; The Washington Post, 2011). These are locales where the practice of sauna diplomacy was previously seen as

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out of step with local as well as diplomatic culture (Valtasaari, 2021: 90:08; Talvitie, 2021: 1.38.08; Torstila, 2024: 25:22). The sauna as such was not considered on par with the “high culture” of dinners or receptions of traditional diplomatic society (Neumann, 2012: 9). However, this rigid practice of diplomacy is increasingly referred to with irony, as one former Finnish Foreign Ministry spokesperson put it, ‘the younger generation doesn’t appreciate the old-school rubber-chicken dinners’ anymore (The Washington Post, 2011).

Sauna diplomacy as a key tenant of Finnish diplomatic presentation abroad parallels the larger post-2000 trend of harnessing soft power and image politics in diplomatic practice (Browning, 2015b: 284; Melissen, 2005: xvii–xviii). Restructuring the sauna as an internationally recognized symbol and site for Finnish diplomacy coincided with a larger push by the Finnish government to revitalize Finland’s international brand (Browning, 2015a). Publicizing Finnish diplomatic sauna societies arose in parallel to a 2010 report commissioned by the Finnish government titled ‘Mission for Finland – How Finland will demonstrate its strengths by solving the world’s most wicked problems’. The report emphasized that ‘instead of setting something new and exciting as Finland’s target image, we should hold on to the factors for which we are already known. We should simply interpret these factors in a way that is new for ourselves and for the world, a way that is appropriate in the present day’ (Kaskinen et al., 2010: 33).

The sauna as a piece of Finland’s image politics and history was re-narrated to help explain Finnish diplomatic success, and as will be argued here, Finland as part of a Western international society. A Finnish state history of the sauna helps elucidate Finnish peace mediation prowess, as well as how Finnish decision-makers maintained sovereignty during the Cold War next to the USSR. In these narrations, the sauna is associated with an image of stateliness, peace, and equality, among other positive, arguably “Western” values. This agenda was outlined in 2010 by then Finnish State Secretary of Foreign Affairs Pertti Torstila at the 15th International Sauna Congress in Tokyo, Japan, during a speech titled ‘Sauna Diplomacy; the Finnish Recipe’. The significance of sauna diplomacy for the Finnish state is well summed up by former Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja (2024) in the pithy one-liner: ‘the sauna knows no borders’.

However, the sauna was not always seen this way by foreign or even Finnish diplomats. More appropriately, the sauna for much of the Cold War was not considered a proper site for diplomatic communication, particularly in North American and European cultures where nudity was (and still is) seen as inappropriate in professional settings. Historically, the sauna has also been associated with gendered exclusion as well as sexual deviance. In short, the sauna was out of line with traditional, that is, “Western” diplomatic culture. In describing the history of sauna diplomacy, and implicitly the invisible borders that have existed between Finland and the world, Torstila (2024: 25:22) stated, ‘little by little the tradition was opened for foreigners’.

The sauna was used officially and unofficially during the Cold War by Finnish diplomats who understood how to situate the practice at the right time and place. It was seen by individual Finnish diplomats as a practice for hosting, more attuned to traditional diplomatic values of hospitality and etiquette than the realpolitik image the Finnish state presents today (Ventelä, 2019: 54). The sauna as a communication practice in Finnish diplomacy was traditionally reserved for interlocutors who either understood Finnish

culture or had similar bathing traditions (e.g. Russia, Sweden and Estonia) (Talvitie, 2021: 1.38.08).<sup>1</sup> Japan, which was more sympathetic to Finland's geopolitical plight during the Cold War and had an interest in Finnish culture, opened saunas in Tokyo and Osaka already in the 1960s (Ipatti, 2019: 112). Russian diplomats, in turn, warmly considered the sauna a very specific Finnish way of resolving arguments or presenting initiatives (Kazimirov, 2009: 198). A cross-section of American diplomats, on the other hand, either saw the sauna as 'Eastern', or were considered too sympathetic to the Finns' cause in a polarized Cold War context if they went to too many Finnish saunas (Evans, 1996: 30; Fry, 1993: 57).

The focus here is to understand Finland's notable success in integrating the sauna into a core "Western" environment of diplomatic practice. In investigating this turn, the subsequent question arises. How has a shifting international understanding of the sauna as a symbol of Finland benefitted Finnish diplomacy? In answering this question, theoretical contemplations on what is termed a 'diplomatic sublime', introduced by Iver Neumann (2006, 2013, 2015), are presented to begin theorizing the interrelation of diplomatic site, place, practice, and presentation. The success of Finnish sauna diplomacy exhibits how innovative diplomatic practice, along with parallel state narration of said practice (presentation), can successfully renegotiate meanings of diplomatic sites and symbols, as well as the geographical boundaries (place) of where certain diplomatic practices are considered appropriate and effective.

Addressing how perceptions of the sauna as a diplomatic practice have changed over time and in different places moves the study of diplomacy beyond its 'redundant and anecdotal' tradition (Sofer, 1988: 196). Merje Kuus (2015a: 369) argued that this requires studying international politics 'beyond the governmental settings of interstate relations into the social fields that frame and support international politics'. This means investigating the 'daily cultural practices of diplomacy', which 'are not an icing on the cake but a constituent component of power relations'. As Neumann (2015: 89) underlined, 'if we overlook how diplomatic events are made, we will forever be chasing their afterglow, instead of understanding them in their sociability'. Concurrently, Davide Nicolini (2012: 10) argued that 'naming, defining, and exemplifying practices is already theorizing them'. Naming, defining, and exemplifying sauna diplomacy in this article as a practice as well as a representation is thus an attempt to theorize it. As such, this article contributes to the growing scholarly literature on diplomatic sites and diplomatic culture, which is part of the larger study of diplomacy in theory and practice.

Data for this analysis include oral history interviews from retired and active Finnish and American diplomats and decision-makers. Fourteen oral histories were conducted by the author in 2021 and 2024 (Finnish: eight men and two women; American: four men). Oral history interviews from The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Archive are also analysed (American: 15 men and three women). Thirty-two oral history transcripts are utilized in total (10 Finns and 22 Americans). Existing secondary research that includes interviews with Finnish diplomats on sauna diplomacy is also employed (Sysiö, 2021; Ventelä, 2019).

This article benefits from the methodological analysis proposed in Foreign Policy Oral History (Reynolds, 2024), which facilitates analysis of temporal changes in foreign policymakers' perceptions of each other. This is done by asking decision-makers to

reflect on the perceptions of others from different points in history (here perceptions of Finland and the sauna over the past half century), then asking them to reflect on their own perceptions and misperceptions in international politics. While Critical Oral History did this regarding perceptions and misperception in decision-making (e.g., Cuban Missile Crisis), Foreign Policy Oral History develops the method for the study of everyday diplomacy. Changes in diplomatic practices thus become more accessible through memory and the ‘traces they leave behind’ (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 308). In highlighting the significance of this method, Torstila (2024: 59:37) noted when reflecting on American foreign policy oral history transcripts, ‘these are important things. These are the kinds of things which I don’t know. I’ve never discussed this, you know, with anybody before except you . . . this . . . way of organizing things from the other side’s point of view’.

From an International Relations (IR) perspective, the interviewee sample size and national composition are limited. However, oral history is inherently a science of the individual and, while not always concerned with standard experience, offers personal reflections and memories of ‘patterned rules of the game and practices’ (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 308). As Bent Boel (2024: 33–34) argued, ‘changing lenses may help us analyse ways in which mental maps can disconnect from physical maps, just as it can induce us to question taken-for-granted understandings of the Cold War and its dynamics’. In taking up Boel’s challenge, this article exhibits the value of Foreign Policy Oral History as a new lens for investigating the Cold War, as well as for offering theoretical contributions to IR and diplomatic studies.

The remainder of the article first offers a theoretical overview of various concepts from the literature on diplomatic site and place to explicate the impact state narration of diplomatic symbols and sites has. Next, the article looks at the benefits the sauna offers as a diplomatic practice for communication when situated and narrated properly. The theoretical discussion builds on Neumann’s application of a diplomatic sublime to understand the power of sites in diplomacy. Memories of Finnish sauna diplomacy are then presented to explicate a diplomatic sublime, or the relationship of narrating diplomatic sites on the one hand, to the impact these priming mechanisms have on the practice of diplomacy on the other. A diplomatic sublime helps explain the success of the Finnish state’s initiative to make the Finnish sauna an acceptable and appealing diplomatic practice with North American and Western European allies after its storied history as an enigmatic Cold War diplomatic practice.

## **Diplomacy of place – communication and meaning-making**

Communication is considered one of the primary aspects of diplomacy (Cohen, 1987; Jönsson and Hall, 2005: 67), with it being stated that ‘communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body’ (Jönsson and Hall, 2003: 195). In this stream of thinking, diplomacy is a structured form of discourse, described as ‘what we may call shared sociability – mutually recognized times, places, and formats for meetings . . . which have eased communications’ (Neumann, 2012: 4–5). As Raymond Cohen (1987, 1) argued, diplomats ‘become adept at using extra-linguistic forms of communication. These forms do not replace language, rather they complement, illustrate or supplement it’. Taking a constructivist perspective, Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall (2005: 68)

contended that ‘meaning does not reside in the message itself but is produced in interactive processes’ in which meaning is created.

Diplomatic sites, places, and practices have increasingly become integral research frames for understanding diplomatic communication as situated and textured by context. This framing reminds us that ‘saying is doing and doing is saying’ (Jönsson and Hall, 2003: 205). Neumann (2013: 5), in turn, claimed that ‘physical surroundings are not dead settings for social life: human activities create them and how we understand them is a result of human negotiations’. However, around the same time in 2012, Mitchell Lerner countered that there was a growing disdain among historians for the phrase ‘place matters’. Lerner (2012: 500) lamented, ‘if “place” can reflect geography and “place” can reflect ideology, and “place” can be any combination of both, how much does it really tell us?’

In attempting to counter Lerner’s pessimism, Neumann (2013: 18) argued that ‘the implication is that the cultural settings of diplomatic encounters are always situated, even when the parties have not met before, because narratives emanating from myth . . . will frame the meeting in the sense that it will structure expectations’. Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut (2015: 308–309) then asserted that ‘geography of practices often matters as much as their history’. Building off this sentiment, Merje Kuus (2015a: 380) contended that ‘the map of diplomatic practice is more textured than a map of states (analysing the “where” of diplomatic practices can substantially illuminate the “how” of that practice, and the other way around)’. In understanding the how, Timo Sysiö (2021) contributed that ‘the relations between people, objects, and the environment that produces and reproduces interstate diplomacy’ must be further investigated.

In beginning to combine IR scholars’ interest in place and practice, and historians’ disdain for parallel maxims of place having meaning, a combination of site, place, and practice is presented here. Different cultural forms and norms of communication texture place and site on a micro-level, changing perceptions of place and site in larger ideological considerations of political belonging. I follow Neumann’s (2015: 79) delineation where a diplomatic ‘site’ refers to a ‘planned setting for some socially significant event . . . where diplomacy actually takes place, and where it can be captured analytically’. Place, in turn, refers to a ‘slice of territory’ (Neumann, 2015: 79), further ‘integrating locality’ to the study of diplomacy (Shimazu, 2012: 336), as well as an analysis of political-geographical presumptions that become associated with place (cities, states, regions). I refer to diplomacy of place to connote this multi-level relationship between site and place in diplomacy, recognizing the need to consider both simultaneously when studying everyday practices of diplomacy.

Despite progress in diplomacy of place research, scholars are still critiqued for being ‘surprisingly devoid of a theoretical engagement with the concepts of space and place’ (McConnell, 2019: 47–48). While historians often use city names such as ‘The Hague’ or ‘Versailles’ to implicitly draw ‘boundaries of shared knowledge and expectations’, they may not consider the implications of these analytical boundary-building processes, or the diplomatic practices that inherently delineate site and place in such a way (Shimazu, 2012: 335). Diplomacy of place research would benefit from a more theoretical perspective, as will be offered here, ‘to examine the ways in which places are brought into relationships in political practice’ (Kuus, 2015b: 42).

### *The sauna as symbol and ritual*

A critical piece of diplomatic communication is symbolic representation (Jönsson and Hall, 2003). Lisa Schirch (2005: 82) posited that ‘symbols hold together paradoxes by representing one set of meanings for one person and a different set of meanings for another’. The sauna as a diplomatic symbol presents as well as conceals the complexity of Finnishness (Muikku-Werner, 1999: 179–180), communicating a curated image of Finland, as well as its preferred reference group (read “Western”), to the world. However, in re-narrating sauna diplomacy as a symbol of Finland, the Finnish state has effectively managed the ‘analytical boundary building process’, and hence, the meaning associated with the sauna as a diplomatic site and practice.

In understanding the Finnish sauna as a diplomatic symbol and communication practice, it is valuable to consider the relationship of communication, symbol, and ritual in diplomacy. The institutionalization of diplomacy is argued to be the ritualization of diplomatic communication (Jönsson and Hall, 2003: 204) and that ‘diplomacy without ritual is inconceivable’ (Kertzer, 1988: 104). The Finnish sauna should be considered a ritual as well as a site, with sauna diplomacy as a symbol representing both.

Talcott Parsons (1964: 35) defines a symbol as a ‘physical or social object, event, aspect of a concrete object, or class or complex of any of these – which has acquired meaning for one or more actors involving a reference to meaningful entities other than the symbol–object itself’. The sauna has long been considered a symbol of Finnishness in Finland, and a key part of the ‘sisu [Finnish term for extraordinary determination in the face of extreme adversity], sauna, and Sibelius’ trifecta (Muikku-Werner, 1999: 175). However, the symbolic meaning and interpretation of the sauna as a symbol internationally has not always been so clear. To shape this symbolic communication with foreign audiences, the Finnish state has shaped a specific narrative and history of sauna diplomacy in international media (Fota, 2023; Gramer, 2023; Landale, 2023; Rothwell, 2024; Savage, 2013; Snyder, 2025; The Washington Post, 2011) and public diplomacy campaigns (Finnish Foreign Ministry, 2024; Vuojolainen, 2011).

The addition of Finnish sauna culture to UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020 (UN Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 2020) imparted further international prestige to the sauna as a symbol of Finland. In parallel, Finnish diplomatic sauna clubs have increasingly become exclusive networking events, in part due to their measured exoticism. As one US Pentagon official remarked about visiting a sauna event at the Finnish Embassy in Washington, DC, ‘honestly, the weirdest and coolest thing I’ve done for work’ (Gramer, 2023).

Once the sauna as a symbol has been effectively communicated and interlocutors enticed, the role of ritual in making the sauna an effective diplomatic practice comes into play. Catherine Bell (1992: 221) argued that rituals, of which diplomatic formality is one, allow ‘persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes’ to ‘both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power’. The sauna is said to be ‘associated with many ritual uses and rules’ (Kivimäki, 2013: 218). However, “‘the rules’”, Timo Martikainen of the Finnish Sauna Society remarked, “‘are instinctive. It’s difficult to be definitive’” (Henley, 2012). Bell (1992: 221–222) continued to describe the power of ritual by stating, ‘it is the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways

that appropriate and condition experience effectively'. Ritualization is effective as social control, however defined, 'only when this control can afford to be rather loose'. In this sense, rituals are only effective if parties willingly participate in them, thus allowing the parameters of interaction, and power of the ritual experts, to be wilfully acquiesced to. Torstila (2024: 11:36) echoed these sentiments by saying, for foreigners, 'I would have to explain the game rules [of the sauna] in a slightly different way'.

### *"Traditional" diplomatic culture of the Occident against the Orient*

In considering a geography of sauna diplomacy, understanding diplomatic culture and some of its geographical premises is useful. Dietrich Kappeler (2004: 354) posed that contemporary diplomatic culture stems from the 'emergence of permanent diplomatic missions in Europe during the Renaissance'. Hedley Bull (1977: 16) saw European diplomatic culture as significant for underpinning any international society. This culture, or 'the common stock of ideas and values possessed by the official representatives of states' was founded upon a common culture of civilization, ethics, and aesthetics. Geoffrey Wiseman (2005) added that civility is a key norm of diplomatic culture. Such a culture is thus 'an ensemble of practices, compartments and historical precedents' (McConnell and Dittmer, 2016: 232) that provides 'information about social roles, the structure of relationships, etiquette and how everyday life should be arranged'—it is a guideline for social interaction (Bolewski, 2008: 146). Diplomatic communication without these formalities, of which hierarchy is one, may cause some to let their guard down and communicate differently. In diplomacy of place, physical markers and the environment present signals and reminders that a specific diplomatic culture and script are in force. For example, dinner diplomacy and cocktail receptions are important communication events in transatlantic relations (Scott-Smith and Snyder, 2013) based on the traditional 'European dinner party' (Neumann, 2012: 9). While these traditional forms of diplomatic culture remain the focus of this article, competing and alternative diplomatic cultures are acknowledged to exist (Dittmer and McConnell, 2016).

Despite this (Western) eurocentrism of traditional diplomatic culture, it has been a struggle for many countries on the European continent to be accepted into this club. In highlighting these struggles, a brief discussion of orientalism and Finlandization is appropriate to highlight Finland's efforts to assert its '*natural* place in the Western European family' (Browning, 2002: 47, original emphasis). Finland as a neutral country during the Cold War, while in most conceptions on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, was not free from ambiguity in the mental maps of 'Westerners', as well as Finns themselves (Alapuro, 2004; Singleton, 1978; Uutela, 2025). For example, Finnish diplomats continually struggled to 'convince others of Finland's neutrality' (Forsberg and Pesu, 2016: 476). The resulting insecurity among Finns, and the uncertainty many foreigners had, in how to categorize Finland during the Cold War as part of either the liberal-democratic West, Socialist East, or something else, was an important premise for perceptions and misperceptions of Finland during this period. This was exhibited by jokingly referring to Finland as an Eastern bloc country ('Kekkoslovakia') or that the SF on Finnish licence plates referred to 'Soviet Finland' rather than Suomi/Finland (Lanko, 2021; Mead, 1991). Many of these uncertainties are represented in the concept of

‘Finlandization’. FB Singleton (1978: 321) argued, ‘the term ‘Finlandization’ has given rise to some misconceptions about the real nature of the policy which Finland has followed within the limitations of its particular situation’. In an alternative formulation, Finlandization was used by foreigners and Finns alike to criticize Helsinki’s close relationship with Moscow and to offer a warning against support for détente in Western European countries (Hanhimäki, 1997: 202–203).

Accordingly, orientalism (Said, 1978), and specifically euro-orientalism (Adamovsky, 2005; Wolff, 1994), is a relevant frame for highlighting the significance of geographical perceptions. Edward Said originally outlined orientalism ‘as a set of discursive practices through which the West structured the imagined East’ (Buchowski, 2006: 463). In this geographical imagination of Orient and Occident, or East and West, the Orient was presented as a backward other to affirm European superiority in social, political, and cultural modernity. At the same time, the Orient was a place of romance, exotic being, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’ (Said, 1978: 1). It was the exotic, emotional other to the Occident’s rational, enlightened self. Said (1978: 20) described orientalism as a way to ‘get hold of . . . [the Orient’s] sublimity’.

While Said largely focused on the Middle East, euro-orientalism developed to consider images of Russia and Eastern Europe as fitting into these political discourses and mental maps of dividing East and West (Buchowski, 2006). Mart Kuldkepp (2023: 67–68), however, argued that “‘Westernness’ and ‘Easternness’ have moved back and forth over time’. The concept of euro-orientalism is exactly to highlight these fluctuations in perceptions and the ‘ill- defined space situated between the West and Russia . . . primarily by its proximity to the latter . . . with an uncertain identity and future’.

The Finnish state recognized and attempted to address misperceptions of Finland’s Westernness during the Cold War via state committees and public diplomacy campaigns (Clerc, 2023; Forsberg and Pesu, 2016). In the 1990s, the ‘back to Europe’ narratives, seen in former Warsaw Pact countries, the Baltic states, and Finland, highlighted efforts to influence international as well as self-perceptions of East and West (Browning, 2002). In 1995, a Finnish delegation of President Martti Ahtisaari, Foreign Minister Tarja Halonen, and Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen made sure to reiterate to US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and US Ambassador to Finland Derek Shearer that ‘we are not an Eastern European country’ (Shearer, 1995). Further highlighting Finland’s perpetual efforts to escape this ‘ill-defined space’, in 2022, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo termed NATO membership Finland’s final step in finally joining the West (Milne, 2022). Perceptions and misperceptions of the sauna parallel these insecurities and uncertainties of Finland’s geographic reference group. The sauna, paired with a successful diplomatic sublime, has been important in convincing international interlocutors of Finland’s true Western identity.

## The sauna as sublime

Following the aesthetic and practice turns in IR, theoretical interest in ‘the sublime’ developed, though ultimately resulting in less “road testing”. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* ran a special issue on the topic in 2006 with the intent to ‘ground IR more firmly in the realm of theory [and] to reiterate its dependence on the wider world

of philosophical inquiry' that historically shaped the field. The *Millennium* editors (2006: i, iv) continued that the sublime 'is more than simply a word, it is a problem. Therefore, when considering the sublime, we must think beyond what it might "be" and instead look at the various attempts made to resolve the problem'. In effect, the story of sauna diplomacy and Finnish state narration should be considered one aspect of broader attempts to 'resolve the problem' of external geographical perceptions of Finland, managing the sublime to be in line with Finland's preferred image politics.

In discussions of diplomacy of place, representations are seen to be key in shaping how the narrator begins to establish meaning, and thus power of place. Neumann (2013: 143) argued that the narration of a diplomatic site is sometimes considered more important for those not present than those who are, because the illusion creates a diplomatic aesthetic. 'If it is a successfully sublime aesthetics, it will alter the state of the opposite numbers and in so doing mentally knock them off site', which then has 'short-term negotiating advantages . . . as well as long-term advantages', such as improved reputation.

A useful definition of the sublime, invoked by Neumann (2006, 2013, 2015) and other IR theorists, is from Immanuel Kant, which considers the sublime as something endless and infinite, something that could not really be defined, shown, or represented. A sublime experience can be generated, for example, by nature (a mountain view or a stormy sea), exceptional historical events, or exceptional people (Clewis, 2009: 37–39). Certain forms of Kant's sublime are also associated with ideas of morality, and as seen in Said's formulation, the mystical and exotic. Merriam-Webster, in turn, defines sublime as a transitive verb, representing a process – 'to elevate or exalt especially in dignity or honor; to render finer (as in purity or excellence)'. All these definitions can be seen in narrations of sauna diplomacy.

When thinking of the sublime as representing a moral code, the Finnish cultural narrative of the sauna has many similarities. The sauna is associated with important periods of the life cycle – the beginning of life (babies born and cleaned) and the ending of life (bodies cleansed before burial) (Edelsward, 1991: 110–116). The sauna has been considered 'a symbol of cleanliness that can be associated with the "cleanness" of society based on the subtle clarity of individual moral and physical responsibilities, for example, concepts of politeness and honesty' (Gannon and Pillai, 2010: 164). As Torstila (2024: 13:09) stated, 'explaining what this . . . old story of the sauna really is . . . its original meaning . . . this seems to be . . . tempting for foreigners to hear'. The sublime is considered attractive due to its implicit association of moral values and adherence to a common moral code (Clewis, 2009: 215), reminiscent of Bull's common ethical code of international society.

Descriptions of the sensory experience of the Finnish sauna often begin with an idealized form of the experience: 'in an authentic Finnish sauna the heat emanating from the special stones feels velvety soft to the skin and it is more penetrating than the heat in a cloud of steam' (Virtanen, 1974: 2). This is then expanded to cover moral values: 'sauna refers not merely to the steamy atmosphere which causes one to sweat, but the design, technology, behaviour, and values inherent in the concept' (Edelsward, 1991: 21). It is stated that 'the heat of the sauna is said to wash away differences in rank and political affiliation, allowing for a more honest and genuine form of communication' (Virtanen, 1974: 37). In the Finnish state narrative, these values are transferred when it is said that

no one can wear a wire in the sauna (Rothwell, 2024) and that ‘you don’t keep your politics up your sleeve when you are not wearing sleeves’ (Torstila, 2010).

In Finnish culture, the sauna is a venerable site (Muikku-Werner, 1999: 178), sometimes compared to a church (Snyder, 2025). It is argued that the moral values imbued in sauna culture make it a valuable diplomatic practice. Lisa-Marlene Edelsward (1991: 165) stated that ‘within the private space of the sauna, moral obligations of honesty and good faith weigh more heavily on the participants than during formal negotiations . . . it is a good opportunity to really get to know the other person, the “real” person, not his business mask, and so facilitate better rapport and communication’. This atmosphere is facilitated by the simple dress code imbued by sauna culture: ‘clothing belongs to the ordinary world. It is part of social hierarchies and possessions and of concepts such as time and work, none of which belong to the sauna. . . Removing one’s clothes means removing oneself from the ordinary world, it means becoming part of the separateness of the sauna’ (Edelsward, 1991: 92). As such, the sauna as a diplomatic site carries these cultural meanings, which help develop a specific sublime. When these values are then associated with sauna diplomacy, they associate Finland and Finnish diplomacy with the common values of traditional diplomatic culture. In addition, for Torstila (2024: 46:18), the sauna represents the Finns’ ‘democratic way of thinking’. The sauna, in these formulations, ‘provides an instrument for making the state sensible’, though sensible in the right way, and primed with narration (Faizullaev, 2013: 92). The sauna is explained in terms of Western and European civilizational values, thus Finland’s Westernness can be encountered as a real entity, rather than simply an abstract concept. As Neumann (2012) argued, diplomatic practices ‘make’ the state as much as states make diplomacy (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 303).

### *State history of a sublime sauna*

Aspects of Neumann’s description of an effective sublime being able to “knock” an interlocutor “off site” can be seen in the Finnish narration of the sauna. By utilizing a history that emphasizes Finns’ negotiating ability in the sauna, a reputation as well as curiosity is created before diplomatic communication even begins. The Finnish state narrative highlights the sauna as a site of high politics, explaining Finland’s success in surviving next to the USSR during the Cold War. Regarding the sublime, the morality and purity of the sauna are thus complemented by a narration of the sauna as associated with realpolitik, exceptional historical events, and exceptional people.

The Finnish state narrative utilizes stories from meetings between Finnish President Urho Kekkonen and top Soviet officials to construct the myth of Finnish asymmetrical advantage in the sauna. Kekkonen’s personal sauna has been termed the ‘most mythical sauna in Finland’ (Kuosmanen, 2017). Torstila (2010) termed this ‘Kekkonen’s sauna legacy’. In 1978, President Kekkonen effectively silenced Soviet requests from Defence Minister Marshal Dmitri Ustinov for joint military exercises by simply throwing water on the sauna stones and saying there were better ways of developing Soviet-Finnish friendship, such as through the sauna.

General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev was also harangued by the Soviet Central Committee for visiting the sauna with President Kekkonen in 1957 (Osborn, 2001). The

result of the two leaders' sauna excursion was the issuance of a communiqué where the Soviet government expressed its preparedness to support Finland's desire to integrate and cooperate with Western Europe. This then purportedly led to a free trade area comprising Finland and seven European Free Trade Association countries in 1971, allowing further integration of Finland with Western European economies. Khrushchev was later criticized for this sauna meeting with Kekkonen, where it was stated 'a proper communist, had gone naked into a sauna with a capitalist and non-socialist, and that was simply something he should not have done' (Torstila, 2010). As a testament to Kekkonen's sauna legacy, the Russian embassy's sauna in Helsinki purportedly adorns a plaque commemorating Kekkonen's first visit to the site (Kazimirov, 2009: 198).

There is usually no explanation in these anecdotes as to how or why the sauna allowed for these outcomes other than the implicit argument that the sauna created an environment that allowed Finns to leverage the limited power they had in Finnish-Soviet relations, along with a well-timed, and seemingly magical, löyly (stream resulting from a toss of water on the hot stones). Torstila (2024: 27:19) recollected that with the Russians, 'we were always under the thumb' so 'we had to use other kind of tricks' such as the sauna.

A key piece absent from the Finnish state narrative is that these stories also made their way to Washington. The sauna as a diplomatic symbol was so effective at knocking the Soviets off site that some high-level Americans, too, became nervous. US Secretary of State Dean Rusk was reticent about President Kekkonen inviting him to visit the sauna when the secretary visited Helsinki in summer 1966. Eric Fleisher (2002: 14), a political officer at the US embassy in Helsinki at the time, recounted that one of the messages Rusk sent in preparation for his trip to Helsinki was 'I will do everything you suggested, but I will not go into a sauna with Kekkonen'. Upon visiting Kekkonen's countryside residence and after initial pleasantries, 'Kekkonen took Rusk by the shoulder and said, "Now we go down to the sauna"'. In response, Rusk turned to Fleisher and half-jokingly asserted 'you're fired'.

Understanding the sauna as a ritual, which maintains different microrelations of power from those of traditional diplomatic settings and practice, offers one explanation for Rusk's hesitancy and the Central Committee's disdain for Khrushchev visiting the sauna with President Kekkonen. It may have been considered that by entering a site defined by Finnish rather than traditional diplomatic etiquette, the playing field, or microrelations of power, shifted in favour of the sauna host. Pekka Hyvärinen stated that 'The president [Kekkonen] was a master of timing, and it was in the sauna that he was able to direct ceremonies best' (Vuojolainen, 2011).

In associating the Finnish sauna with high politics, the sauna has been aligned with the established image of Finland as a peacekeeper and mediator. Torstila (2010) proclaimed that the 'sauna is a form of social communication. Decisions and negotiations take less time in the high heat. Sauna cools down overexcitement and melts away political differences'. Sauna diplomacy is associated with the history of numerous Finnish peacekeeping and mediation efforts from Aceh to Namibia and Cyprus, as well as Finland's historical image as a 'peacekeeping superpower' (Palosaari, 2013). Narrating the sauna as a site of diplomatic negotiations aligns with the Finnish Foreign Ministry's (2010: 7) objective to 'increase Finland's international clout' through peace mediation

history. It also associates the sauna with the goal of peace as a ‘standard of civilization’, which is a prerequisite for being a member of international society (Bowden, 2004; Bull, 1977: 18). A key aspect of Neumann’s (2013: 144) sublime is diplomats’ ability to present the practice of diplomacy as appearing ‘sublime at a distance’. This is done through creating a mystique of diplomacy, ‘particularly when diplomats appear to succeed in averting terrible situations or keeping them from spreading’. The association of sauna diplomacy and peace does exactly this.

As a counterpoint, Satumaari Ventelä (2019) argued that ‘the reputation the Finnish sauna enjoys as a venue of hardline political negotiating and peace brokering is greatly exaggerated’. Individual Finnish diplomats rather consider the sauna a form of traditional diplomatic hosting and entertaining larger groups ‘for whom the sauna space presented itself as a special attraction’. In reformulating his 2010 presentation, Torstila (2024) reflected that the sauna can set the table for future negotiations, allow interlocutors time to digest a proposal without having to formally respond, or provide an informal bonding experience. The sauna creates a context and a relationship in which more formal negotiations eventually arise. Former Finnish President Tarja Halonen (2021: 38.30) echoed these sentiments saying that sauna diplomacy ‘is a skill that must be maintained, so that people still talk openly’. These recollections address Ventelä’s concerns and preserve sauna diplomacy as symbolizing peace as well as civilized international society.

Hiding these paradoxes and re-narrating the sauna as a symbol of Finnish diplomacy, and specifically Finnish diplomacy as a part of international society, has successfully induced international interlocutors to engage in sauna diplomacy. It has indeed become a special attraction. These stories of Finnish leaders achieving peace as well as outlasting the Soviets increase the credibility of the sauna as an official site of diplomacy, raising contemporaries’ interest. The Finnish Diplomatic Sauna Society is reportedly one of the most coveted invites to receive in Washington, DC, elevating the status of the sauna as a symbol that relies ‘on a combination of exclusivity and scarcity’ (Leira and de Carvalho, 2025: 28). As Neumann (2013: 153) stated, ‘reputation builds aura and aura makes light work’.

In building aura, the Finnish state has also successfully capitalized on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage label with traditional practices of nation branding and public diplomacy (Kuutma, 2007: 180), which is in line with past Finnish efforts to utilize the UN for ‘status-updating’ (Tuominen, 2022). Obtaining the UNESCO world heritage label is an important step in developing an effective diplomatic sublime and elevating the honour and dignity of the sauna. Kristin Kuutma (2007: 180) outlined that ‘the UNESCO Masterpiece List is in essence a powerful act of representation that fashions cultures and redefines policies’. Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvalho (2025: 30) contended that status is not only concerned with rank, but also association with a core status group that signals civilization, again reminiscent of international society. The UNESCO label effectively imparts this status on sauna diplomacy, further distancing the image of Finland from a perceived history of Eastern European ambiguity and associating it with traditional diplomatic culture via the UN as a locus of international society and peace.

## East and West

Cold War perceptions of the Finnish sauna from American and Western European diplomats highlight the intermingled nature of political and cultural relations by presenting the sauna in their memories as a geographically and ideologically situated diplomatic practice. Officials who visited Finland remained fond of the practice, while others who only encountered the sauna via diplomats who exported the practice, more often saw it as something Eastern, not in line with traditional diplomatic culture. Increased openness to the sauna today from foreign interlocutors, compared with its more situated nature during the Cold War, underlines the value of developing a successful diplomatic sublime.

During the Cold War, Deputy Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Helsinki 1974–1977 Robert Houston (1990: 28) recollected, ‘once you have a sauna with a Finn, you really have a friend’. US Ambassador to Finland (1950–1952) John Moors Cabot, a member of the Boston Brahmin (Boston elite), was fond of the Finnish sauna, using sauna practice at the US embassy in Warsaw in the 1960s to build comradery among male foreign service officers and cut through the rigidity of State Department culture (Evans, 1996: 30). During the 1972–1973 Dipoli preparatory consultations for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, hosted outside of Helsinki, ‘sauna parties’ were popular among diplomats East and West (Torstila, 2024), who bonded over ‘their host city’s dearth of cultural attractions’ (Morgan, 2018: 112). US Ambassador to Romania (1994–1997) Alfred Moses (2005: 61) also used the sauna in Bucharest alongside traditional diplomatic hobbies to develop rapport among US foreign policy elites: ‘President Bush and I swapp[ed] stories in the sauna at the end of a busy day and then up the next morning for tennis’. In the 1990s, when US Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Owens visited Finland, he was treated to a ‘stag dinner’ and sauna evening by his Finnish Navy counterpart (Karaer, 2004: 147–148). Indeed, the sauna was positively assessed as a form of male bonding—a key aspect of Finnish sauna culture (Berghäll and Hotakainen, 2010).

Alternatively, US diplomats who did not spend time in Finland considered the sauna an ‘Eastern European’ way of meeting (Evans, 1996: 30). Others commented that the sauna was sometimes associated with Finnish President Kekkonen making political concessions to the Soviets. Deputy Chief of Mission Samuel Fry (1993: 57) at the US embassy in Helsinki 1977–1981 recollected that ‘we at the embassy were criticized on occasion for perhaps presenting the Finnish position maybe too clearly. Then it looked like you had gone to too many Finnish saunas’. Washington was unsure if closer, intimate relations with the Finns, as a sauna would entail, were something safe (see for example, Hanhimäki, 1997). The sauna as an exotic practice of conversing in the nude mixed the intimate and the professional when the sauna was used as a diplomatic site. Diplomacy is described to be a self-effacing practice, where the outside world is seldom allowed a pass to the personal backstage (Neumann, 2005). Mixing the personal and the private, outside the norms or traditional diplomatic culture, may have been hard for American diplomats to understand, paralleling political ambiguities associated with Cold War Finland. As Sasson Sofer (2007: 35) pondered, ‘the duality of closeness and estrangement is inherent in diplomacy, as it is always surrounded by suspicion and divided loyalties’.

There was uncertainty among Finns themselves as to the appropriateness of sauna diplomacy during the Cold War. Former Finnish Undersecretary of State Heikki Talvitie commented that in the Netherlands, for example, ‘the sauna was considered a shady place, more like an oriental massage parlour with all sorts of things involved’ (Ventelä, 2019: 47). This alludes to the fact that ‘sauna’ in parts of Central Europe can denote a homosexual meeting spot. Today, there are specific homosexual saunas in Washington, DC, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and London that all openly advertise as ‘gay’ saunas. In Dublin during the 1960s, the Finnish embassy’s Irish business contacts were also hesitant to use the sauna due to similar ‘moral issues, not practical’ ones (Vuojolainen, 2011). Talvitie (2021: 1.38.08) continued on the usage of the sauna as a situated geographical and cultural practice, stating, ‘well, if you are an ambassador or diplomat in Paris, you are not representing in sauna . . . in Paris, London, whatever, I don’t think would suit’. Torstila (2024, 25:22) echoed this, saying the sauna ‘doesn’t work in Paris. Really it does not. It does not work in The Hague’.

American and Finnish foreign ministries also attempted to discourage using the sauna with colleagues. In the 1980s, when Talvitie was ambassador to Yugoslavia, the Foreign Ministry in Helsinki informed him ‘that the sauna evenings could no longer be covered from the official embassy budget as “it is not [diplomatic] entertaining if two men sit face to face and eat a greasy sausage”’ (Ventelä, 2019: 63). There was an air of disdain for the lack of formality that the sauna entailed, not seen as in line with the etiquette of diplomatic culture. Similarly, Washington had episodes of disappointment when US ambassadors visited the sauna publicly. US Minister to Finland Avra Warren (1947–1950) showed up on the front page of *Times* ‘stark naked at one of these Finnish saunas. He was out lying in the snow being beaten with bush rods [vasta/vihta in Finnish – a common form of enjoyment when in the sauna]’. One of Warren’s State Department juniors at the time, Franklin Crawford (2002: 8), recounted that ‘I don’t think the Department [of State] thought that was so hot’.

Adding to the sauna’s ambiguity, and despite the Finnish state narrative that no one wears a wire in the sauna, American diplomats also remembered the sauna as an insecure site for communication. Jay Katzen (1990: 20), a political officer at the US embassy in Bucharest 1969–1971, recalled that ‘the Romanians got the last laugh on the Finns, incidentally, because of all the places the Finns thought were sacred and would not be violated by eavesdropping, the Romanians cleverly put a bug inside the thermostat of the Finnish ambassador’s sauna’. The Americans and Finns, however, began to use this to their advantage:

When the plumbing didn’t work, you could yell at the wall that Socialist plumbing clearly can’t operate. And an hour later or so, Popescu, the plumber, would knock on the door—just having happened to be in the neighborhood. Similarly, just before we left, we would tell the walls that there was this or that person who obviously had been arrested and isn’t it a shame we can’t say hello to him or her. And the next morning, as by levitation, he or she would appear in front of the door, looking pale but walking a poodle that clearly had been given to him or her for the day (Katzen, 1990: 20)

These ‘burlesque’ episodes, as American diplomats termed them, or absurd, comical images of Eastern Europe (reminiscent of orientalist discourses), highlighted the

meaning foreigners ascribed to the Finnish sauna as a site of diplomatic communication. When this example was posed to Torstila (2024: 1:00:55), he noted, ‘I never came to think of it. Never. Never. Yes . . . perhaps we were . . . naive in that sense. . . . But of course we knew our own saunas, but when you went to another sauna somewhere . . . anything may have been in the so-called, Soviet concrete . . . 60% mics’.

Finns traditionally utilized the sauna as a diplomatic practice only in contexts where co-communicators were also comfortable with the sauna, knowledgeable of the practice, and thus understood the cultural and moral parameters of the environment (e.g. Russia, Sweden, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Japan). However, with a successful diplomatic sublime, this is changing. Former US Ambassador to Finland (2009–2015) Bruce Oreck featured pictures of himself in the sauna on multiple Christmas cards, creating international buzz (Newcomb, 2013). This support paralleled the initial 2010 push to reinvigorate Finland’s international brand and re-narrate sauna diplomacy. Along with the growing popularity of the Washington, DC, Finnish Diplomatic Sauna Society (Horowitz, 2010), gaining public support from Western dignitaries is an important aspect in constructing a diplomatic sublime, elevating the status of the sauna and reshaping traditional Western European-centric norms of diplomatic communication. Ambassador Oreck was awarded the Löylyhenki [spirit of the sauna] award by the Finnish Sauna Society in 2014 for ‘actively distributing information about the [sauna] concept’ (Finnish Sauna Society, 2021).

As such, Kuus (2015a: 380) implored IR scholars ‘to think about diplomacy as a structured terrain of practice’ that can ‘make certain practices more likely’. The sauna is one such practice, particularly as ‘diplomacy is as much about cultural relations as it is about political relations’ (Bolewski, 2008: 155). The re-narration of sauna diplomacy gives intriguing insights into these processes of situated and geographically specific diplomatic practices. Creating a successful diplomatic sublime, along with presenting Finnish culture within a frame of traditional diplomatic culture, but with a modern twist, was a first step in having the sauna as a diplomatic practice accepted and engaged by more traditional diplomatic audiences.

## **Gendering the narrative**

Regarding the Finnish state presentation that the sauna embodies equality, it should be recognized that the sauna has had a difficult history as a political practice when it comes to gender and sexuality – a central paradox that a diplomatic sublime helps obscure. Aside from the connotations of homosexuality some cultures associated with the sauna as noted above, there were also gendered, administrative hesitations. These gender ambiguities, too, can be associated with discourses and values that separate an imagined Occident and Orient.

Historically, foreign governments understood the significance of the sauna in any ambassador’s portfolio when posted to Finland. The Americans worried about gendered aspects of Finnish political life and the lack of access a female ambassador might have. In the 1960s, when career foreign service officer Margaret Joy Tibbetts (1964: 49) was appointed ambassador by President Lyndon B. Johnson, there was speculation that she would be assigned to Finland, though she was eventually assigned to Norway (Department

of State News Letter, 1964: 32). A former State Department colleague recounted of the decision that ‘Tibbetts was supposedly going to Finland first, but the Finns turned her down because a lot of business is done in the sauna’ (Lee, 1990: 12).

Almost a decade later, another female career foreign service officer’s appointment as ambassador to Finland, Rozanne Ridgway, was the subject of similar qualms. Samuel Fry (1993: 57) recounted there were concerns that ‘she [Ridgway] couldn’t sauna with the President of Finland or the Foreign Minister’ and thus, ‘would miss these sauna confidences’. However, this ‘turned out to be utter and complete nonsense, of course. The interesting part was that when she saunaed with their wives she learned a hell of a lot more from them about what was going on in Finland than she ever would have if she had been behind a wall talking with the men’. Ridgway served as US ambassador to Finland from 1977 to 1980.

President Halonen (2022: 38.30), when asked about the sauna, remarked that the first Swedish female ambassador to Finland was ‘pretty late’ (Eva Walder Brundin in 2006) ‘and when it was proposed, some people in Sweden said that you can’t send a woman to Finland as an ambassador because of the sauna’. Halonen recalled that former Swedish Foreign Minister Lena Hjelm-Wallén (1994–1998) joked, ‘what are they now really worried about? That she [Halonen] and I are women, and the ambassador [Brundin] is a woman. That the generals are left out of the sauna?’

Other prominent female Finnish politicians spoke out against gender-segregated sauna traditions. Elisabeth Rehn, the first female minister of defence in Finland and the world, stated in 1992 about ending the Finnish Defence Ministry’s old boys’ sauna culture, “‘I believe in making decisions when I am fully clothed and not when I am naked . . . That way I have my notebooks at hand – and everybody knows what has been decided’”. *The Washington Post* ran the story with the headline: ‘Sweating to break the “sauna barrier”: Finnish women defy a national institution, move business back to the boardroom’ (Dobbs, 1992). These memories and traces of how to engage in Finnish political life, from different national perspectives, offer insights into the significance and (self-)perceptions of the sauna, gender, and change over time in Finnish political culture.

A second point to the gendered nature of the sauna is that, despite Finnish narration that the sauna is an egalitarian experience, some foreigners have remained uncomfortable with the sauna in a professional setting. US Deputy Chief of Mission in Helsinki (1993–1996) Arma Karaer (2004: 147) recalled that while she used the sauna personally, she did not feel comfortable using it professionally. Finnish male politicians implored her to host sauna evenings, but she simply ‘couldn’t oblige them’. In effect, it is exactly this lack of comfort in the sauna that a diplomatic sublime attempts to overcome. As Torstila (2024: 25:22) recollected, ‘you have to have people who like sauna. And . . . if you invite people who are not . . . familiar with the . . . basic idea, then you have to . . . introduce them very carefully, slowly . . . and then later on they may accept’.

These memories raise a key limitation of the sauna as a diplomatic practice, or how the sauna as a diplomatic site is gendered. Diplomacy is said to be textured by a history of patriarchy (Towns, 2020: 573–574). The sauna as a site of politics has similarly been the site of conformity to these traditions, but also the site of subtle nuance. The Finnish state likes to focus on the sauna as a site of high politics and peace mediation. These

images belong to a masculine diplomatic image of the ‘controlled communicator’ (Towns, 2020: 586). The Finnish state narrative more so reinforces the presumption ‘that women can enter and command if they shed what is made to be “feminine” qualities’ (Towns, 2020: 583). Torstila (2024: 15:20) recollected that while gender equality is paramount in the work of Finnish diplomacy, ‘traditionally men in such situations are more interested in having saunas than the ladies’. Fry’s recollection of Ambassador Ridgway also recognizes gendered diplomatic communication associated with the sauna, though in a nuanced manner.

This gendered perspective is also seen in Torstila’s recollections from when he was the Finnish ambassador to Stockholm from 2002 to 2006. He established his own sauna club (or ‘bastu kabinet’) with prominent male Swedish interlocutors, to the disdain of certain female Swedish politicians. When confronted about this gendered exclusion, Torstila’s counterproposal was to ask his wife to host the female parliamentarians. While Torstila (2024: 14:15) reflected that due to diplomatic etiquette, he did not feel comfortable inviting and entertaining women at his bastu kabinet, this nonetheless reflects traditional gendered practices of diplomacy that may cause women to feel awkward or ‘out of place in masculinised diplomatic spaces’ (Standfield, 2022: 379). Even in the early 2020s, the male deputy head of mission in Stockholm reportedly ran the bastu cabinet while the female Finnish ambassador, Maimo Henriksson, only joined for drinks after (Torstila, 2024). It should also be noted that the first Finnish female ambassador to Stockholm (Liisa Talonpoika) was only appointed in 2018.

Other Finnish ambassadors have found ways around these issues. Tyyne Leivo-Larsson, for example, the first Nordic female to lead a government (1958 as deputy prime minister) as well as female Finnish ambassador to Oslo (1958–1966), simply had everyone use towels in the sauna if they felt the need (Ventelä, 2019: 50–51). This proposal of a sekasauna [gender mixed sauna] with towels, or bathing suits as is now common in mixed public Finnish saunas, has been implemented and proposed by career Finnish diplomat Timo Sysiö (2021: 310).

The current official Finnish strategy is that genders can talk over drinks in the fireplace room [takkahuone]. However, there sometimes remains an invisible barrier between conversations conducted in and outside of the sauna. In the author’s own experience, even when important information is passed between men within the sauna, and women are informed to ask about this outside the sauna, the women felt uncomfortable referencing a private conversation that the men had in the sauna. As former Finnish Ambassador to the US Mikko Hautala mused, ‘whatever happens in the sauna stays in the sauna’ (Krueger, 2024). When the sauna remains gendered, communication also remains gendered. This is a professional limitation to equality not only for sauna diplomacy, but diplomacy more generally.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, Helsinki has gained unprecedented leverage in changing the global narrative of Finland from a questionable Cold War Nordic/Eastern European state to a Western wunderkind. From a country seen as depressed, part of the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, and full of heavy drinkers (Karaer, 2004: 146; Sinkkonen, 2013:

50–51), to the happiest, ‘least corrupt, most egalitarian, one of the most educated, and most democratic countries in the world’ (Aaltola, 2023). While these ideal types are of course exaggerations, they highlight the emotional, cultural, and historical frame in which many Finnish diplomatic initiatives are shaped (Reynolds, 2023). As Browning (2015a: 206) pointed out, the 2010 Finnish Country Brand report was a self-proclaimed attempt to improve Finnish self-esteem. It is with a diplomatic sublime that the Finnish state has elevated the dignity and honour of the sauna as a diplomatic site. In this sense, and by looking at how understandings of the sauna have shifted away from varied experiences to a more singular mythical narrative of great Finnish statesmen countering Soviet oppression or saving the world from conflict, the identity validation from Western and traditional diplomatic culture that Finns have historically sought becomes clear.

The numerous personal memories of diplomats presented here can be seen as inverses of the current Finnish state narrative of sauna diplomacy: that the sauna is a safe site for communication where spying does not occur, that the sauna makes all equal, and that the sauna is a site of high politics as well as hardline peace negotiations. While partial truths can be found in all these stereotypes, memories shed light on the paradoxes that the Finnish state narrative of the sauna as a diplomatic symbol conceals. Concealing paradoxes, however, is a crucial first step in creating a successful diplomatic sublime for renegotiating international perceptions and retexturing the map of diplomatic practice.

By elucidating the where of diplomatic practice, we gain more insight into the how. Regarding sauna diplomacy, looking at how the “where” has changed, we also gain insight into what the “how” of sauna diplomacy is and the everyday practices of power, as well as how it fluctuates geographically. By comparing where the sauna was considered acceptable diplomatic practice during the Cold War with today, we can analytically go beyond the mythical state façade of the sauna as an emollient of power politics and state negotiations and begin to investigate the sauna as a more nuanced diplomatic communication practice and site. I argue in this article that this multi-level process, combining sited diplomacy, place, practice, and presentation, can be theorized as a diplomatic sublime.

In squaring Lerner’s circle of place meaning everything and nothing at the same time, the process of change the Finnish sauna has undergone as a diplomatic symbol highlights that diplomatic site, place, practice, and presentation have a dialectical relationship. Wilfried Bolewski (2008: 152) argued that ‘good argumentative points and diplomatic techniques are useless without the ability to communicate them’. In addition to this, a diplomatic sublime poses that the ability to successfully communicate diplomatic technique subsequently has an influence on said technique. Recollections from US and Finnish diplomats presented here confirm this point by showing how perceptions and relations were negatively impacted by the geopolitical ambiguity of Finland in the Cold War (Browning, 2015a), due to a neglect of presentation (state narration). This then influenced where Finnish diplomats felt comfortable utilizing the sauna as a diplomatic site and practice. Sauna diplomacy was then only effective when situated in a proper geographical place and demographic context. Diplomats who did not have an intimate relationship with Finland did not understand or situate the sauna in their geographical mind maps as the Finns would have liked, limiting the demographic that would willingly engage in sauna diplomacy. Alternatively, as Finnish public diplomacy has narrated the sauna to align with traditional diplomatic values of high politics and peace negotiations, as well as arguable

“Western” values of equality, democracy, and trust, the demographic and geographical context in which the sauna appeals as a diplomatic site has expanded significantly.

At the same time, Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson (1985: 577) warned that both larger and smaller nations can put themselves at risk when pursuing prestige uncritically. A policy of prestige – seen here in Finland’s state narration of sauna diplomacy as Finland’s asymmetrical secret to power – can easily transform itself into a policy of bluff when prestige is based on appearance rather than substance. The credibility of sauna diplomacy as a conduit to prestige and thus, more effective diplomatic communication, lies in an acceptance of the paradoxes that sauna diplomacy as a symbol conceals.

In accepting said paradoxes, there are two key challenges for maintaining the content of sauna diplomacy and a successful diplomatic sublime. The first is addressing the issue of gender inequality sauna diplomacy comprises. Despite a growing openness to mixed-gender public saunas in Finland, where both sexes simply wear bathing suits, there is resistance to this *modus vivendi* in Finnish sauna diplomacy. Ambassador Leivo-Larsson’s or Timo Sysiö’s strategy of using towels to allow an inclusive sauna would promote equality. The shortcoming is that this strategy of equality in the sauna may be *too* exotic, counteracting Finland’s objectives of associating Finnish diplomatic practices with traditional diplomatic culture. Progressive projects for equality in diplomacy are oftentimes at odds with the conservative nature of the profession – a paradox in its own right. Therefore, creating equality in sauna diplomacy is part of a larger project of creating equality in traditional diplomatic culture.

The second challenge is educating a new generation of Finnish diplomats about the unspoken rules and intricacies of utilizing the sauna in a political sense. The sauna is context dependent, as well as unique to each individual’s own diplomatic style. When discussing certain Finnish diplomats’ application, or disdain for the sauna, they were described as ‘sauna crazy’ or not being ‘a sauna man’ (Torstila, 2024). While it is easy to educate young Finnish diplomats to the value of the sauna as a practice of public diplomacy or hosting, it is harder to teach how to use the sauna as a nuanced political practice. This is increasingly difficult as for many, sauna diplomacy was seen as important for relations with Russia (Torstila, 2024). As the aggregate of diplomatic interactions with Russian counterparts decreased due to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, sauna diplomacy has naturally developed in a new diplomatic context. In effect, the map of Finnish sauna diplomacy also changed alongside shifts in the map of where diplomacy was considered (however temporarily) politically acceptable.

This article highlights the value of Foreign Policy Oral History in IR theory building. It offers a methodological innovation for investigating individual memories in international politics, uncovering the unspoken rules of diplomatic practice, and investigating the backstage of the diplomat’s craft. It is specifically through oral histories that these microhistories and implicit rules of diplomatic practice, as well as their malleability, become apparent. Such knowledge is highly relevant when developing future diplomats’ competencies, which preserves, as well as builds, a diplomatic sublime.

In concluding his memories of sauna diplomacy and reflecting on a new generation of Finnish diplomats, Torstila (2024: 1:13:27; 1:17:38) pined, ‘I hope that they will be taught. I’m not the teacher anymore. . . [The sauna is a] very special Finnish tool. I hope that . . . the present Finnish diplomatic generation understands the value of this tool’.

As the evolution of sauna diplomacy has shown, understanding how a map of diplomatic practices is textured is invaluable for studying the diplomat's craft. Understanding the interrelationship of site, place, practice, and presentation is how a diplomatic sublime is sustained and developed. It is with this diplomatic sublime that the sauna will truly come to know no borders.

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## Note

1. Sweden has a strong sauna tradition (bastu), as well as Russia (banya). However, the sauna is arguably more intertwined with numerous Finnish cultural practices and more pervasive in everyday life compared to comparable traditions in Sweden or Russia.

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## Author biography

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