

**A MULTIMODAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF CARTOONS ON THE US
AND RUSSIAN RELATIONS UNDER THE BARACK OBAMA AND
DONALD TRUMP ADMINISTRATIONS**

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This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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ABSTRACT

A Multimodal Semiotic Analysis of Cartoons on the US and Russian Relations Under the Barack Obama and Donald Trump Administrations

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The objective of this project is to analyze the political cartoons created by Indian artist Paresh Nath in order to uncover the similarities and differences between the way in which the US-Russian relationship was depicted during the Trump and Obama administrations. The framework used for analysis is Multimodal Social Semiotics. The artefacts are cartoon representations of the most important events that influenced the interaction between both countries in each administration. The purpose of this work is to apply the chosen framework to discover the cartoonist's use of symbolism and metaphorical representations to make reference to the political reality presented in his cartoons, and how these representations are connected to his motivation and background. Additionally, this thesis seeks to identify the role that political cartoons play in reflecting a critical view of contemporary issues.

DEDICATION

To my dear mom,

Everything I am, I owe it to you. To you, I dedicate every achievement in my life. You are my role model, my hero, and my light in the darkest times.

To my brother Adriel,

Because I want you to remember that hard work always pays off, and sometimes, blessings come along. Make the most out of every opportunity presented. You are a little genius to me, and if you ever need me, I will always be there for you.

To Dr. Moyna,

For letting me know about this blessing in disguise. You showed me what it means to pursue a career that you're passionate about, and it is because of you so many doors have been opened for me in my college years. Thank you for being an inspiration for me.

To my best friend, Fluffy Buckbeak, R.I.P,

Because he was by my side during those sleepless nights, keeping me company while I began working for this project. Always and forever in my heart, mi gordito.

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All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cartoons, as visual and rhetorical representations published in the media, have the ability to influence people's perceptions of the geopolitical world and contemporary issues (Hallet & Hallet, 2012). Cartoonist Maurice De Bevere (2008, p. 60), better known as Morris, believes cartoons constitute "a metalanguage discourse about the social order," as they are composed of rich multimedia resources in which language, visual images, and hyper figurative figures interact together to construct a perspective of the real world. As a result, through the combination and use of various meaning resources, cartoons create a "cultural induced message" (Hallet & Hallet, p. 60) relevant to a particular nation's identity, or that of a social group, to appeal to its members and exert a particular ideological influence, in which the artist's identity is also embedded.

Cartoons have the power to legitimize the interpretation of a politicized context according to the artist perspective. Additionally, they do much more than simply entertain its readers. For example, cartoons offer a carefully constructed analysis and interpretation of a certain topic; they pass judgement; and they can influence readers' opinions and emotions towards a particular event and/or social group (Hallet & Hallet, 2012). For instance, if young readers are exposed to cartoons about the importance of the environment, they might feel that taking care of the planet is important. The cartoonist's feelings, knowledge, and social background and position are always reflected in the way they approach the representation of topics in their work. Thus, the knowledge/viewpoint that the artist shares with their audience creates a connection that might render normative judgements about social issues (Hallet & Hallet).

Considering the significant social role that cartoons, defined by Hallet and Hallet (2012) as “the encyclopedias of popular culture” (p. 59), seem to play in contemporary society, it is important to uncover how artists use their available semiotic resources (i.e., elements to convey meaning, such as text or images) to construct and communicate certain messages to specific audiences. The purpose of this work is to undertake this task by focusing on one of the most important contemporary cartoonists, India-based artist Paresh (Paresh Nath). Specifically, this thesis will examine his representations of the US-Russian relationship under the Obama and Trump administrations.

Paresh Nath is an editorial cartoonist, commentator, and a political satirist working for the *Khaleej Times* newspaper, published in English in Dubai and the United Arab Emirates since 2005 (Paresh, 2006). Paresh also works as the Chief cartoonist for the *Herald Tribune* newspaper and the *Delhi Times* magazine in India (Team, 2013). With a postgraduate degree in English and American Literature and 22 years of experience in political cartoons, he was awarded two consecutive UN Awards in 2000 and 2001, and the French honor “Le Chevalier” at the International Editorial Festival (Team). Paresh’s work is syndicated in the *New York Times*, *The Week*, the *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), *International Newsweek*, *Los Angeles Times*, *World Press Review*, *The Guardian*, *Ouest France*, *Time*, and *Courrier International*, among others (Paresh). His work has also been exhibited at cartoon festivals in Dubai, France, Turkey, Iran, Romania, Brazil, and the US. Paresh describes his work in these terms: “the job of a cartoonist is like that of a communicator for the people” (Team).

The first step in the examination of the way in which Paresh chooses to represent the chosen topic, the US and Russian relations under the Obama and Trump administrations, is to learn more about historical and political aspects connected to it. Russia has long been considered

a key partner for the US and one of the most-discussed topics in American foreign policy due to three specific aspects: 1) the country's geostrategic position as the world's largest continental power, 2) its nuclear capabilities, and 3) its influential position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, which gives it the ability to cooperate or obstruct decisions on US national interest (Stent, 2012). These three aspects will be important to remember as the relationship in the two different presidential administrations is analyzed in the next section of this work, "Historical and Political Background."

2. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Russia and the Barack Obama Administration

President Barack Obama's administration started in 2009. At that time, the US and Russian relationship was not close because of the existence of Cold War stereotypes inherited from President Obama's predecessors. Thus, the US president's main goal was to overcome those stereotypes establishing the basis for a long-term cooperative relationship with president Medvedev, in order to safeguard economic and international security interests, through a set of measures known as the Reset Agenda. This policy encompassed the following: The New START Treaty, a strategic partnership with regards to United Nations Security Council decisions, a strong coalition against Iran, Russia's cooperation in the Afghanistan war, a bilateral presidential commission, the 123 Agreement, and Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization (Deyermond, 2013). However, from the beginning, the cooperation between both countries was characterized by disagreements in regard to missile defense and humanitarian intervention. Additionally, the Reset Agenda was affected by a strained NATO-Russia relationship and disputes with third party states such as Syria, Libya, and Iraq (Deyermond). Therefore, during his second term, President Obama sought to address these diplomatic obstacles, which led to a change in priorities to domestic internal affairs reinforcing the security and national interests of the nation (Lasher & Sixta Reinhart, 2016).

President Obama's new objective was to implement a retrenchment in foreign policy and to work on putting an end to the War on Terror. Therefore, he was reluctant to send more US troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, and his interference was limited to airstrikes and supplemental

training for the affected states' forces. This strategy was known as "shadowboxer" or "leading from behind" (Lasher & Sixta Reinhart, 2016). However, the President did not predict the major negative role that the new Russian president would play in American plans. Vladimir Putin became the Russian president in 2012, and he had a clear objective in regards to US foreign policy: He hoped to limit the West democratic expansion and intervention through the creation of nonproliferation agreements and the improvement of trade relations. Nevertheless, as Russia offered nuclear support to Iran's government and failed to condemn Syrian government's attack on its civilians, the US drifted apart from Russia on any mutual agreement or partnership in foreign policy. For example, President Obama provided humanitarian aid in these territories and assisted in the establishment of liberal democratic institutions, which Russia strongly disapproved of. Additionally, agreements on nonproliferation were difficult as Russia improved its arms arsenal when its leaders felt threatened by the US defensive response in the Middle East. The Obama administration, in turn, responded with the increase and modernization of its missile defense with the support of NATO for specific deployment in vulnerable Soviet states in Europe, and, most importantly, for the defeat of ISIS. Plans for economic ties between Russia and the US also became hardly attainable after the Russian annexation of Crimea and Ukraine in 2014, which resulted in US economic sanctions. As a result, Russia unexpectedly established an alliance with China.

The China-Russian relationship became crucial in the United Nations Security Council, as it obstructed US foreign interests. China became Russia's main client for the supply of hydrocarbons and military hardware and cybersecurity powers (Stent, 2018). Additionally, China and Russia expressed their mutual intention to create a Post-Western World, excluding the US through multilateral organizations (Stent, 2018). Unfortunately, President Obama was unable to

foresee the advance of Russia as a central power, particularly once it had established its alliance with China, which would have unfavorable consequences for the next administration.

By the end of the Obama presidency, Russian president Vladimir Putin had rapidly transformed Russia into one of the major threats to US interests. The reasons for this change were the following: the rise of the China-Russia alliance; the development and modernization of Russia's conventional non-strategic weapons and cybersecurity power; Russian's influence on countries belonging to the former Soviet Union; the country's domination of Ukraine and Crimea; and its allegiance with Syria and Iran for nuclear arms deployment (Lasher & Sixta Reinhart, 2016). Although President Obama had succeeded in achieving the recovery of the American economy and had reestablished the US as the central global superpower, he had left Russian affairs unresolved for the next administration.

2.2. Russia and the Donald Trump Administration

President Donald Trump's administration started in 2017, and, from the very beginning, it was clear that Russia had played and would have a major role in the US political sphere both domestically and internationally. For example, according to the Mueller Investigation, even though there appears not to have existed any mutual agreement between Trump and his campaign and Russia, Russian interference with the 2016 presidential elections seems to have helped secure President Trump's victory (Kotkin, 2019). From the very beginning of his presidency, the American president showed he had close ties with Putin. This relationship appears to have led Mr. Trump to favor Russia in public statements and important decisions on international interference, multilateral organizations, and even domestic issues, and to protect

Putin by challenging congress and NATO on the implementation of tougher sanctions and penalties towards Russia (Miller, Jaffe, & Rucker, 2017).

The main difference between the Obama and Trump administrations can, therefore, be defined by the prevalence of President Trump's favorable actions towards President Putin. The Trump administration showed more flexibility on using greater military force to attack terrorism than President Obama had. This not only benefited both countries' security, but also, according to the Trump administration, ensured the protection of markets, resources, and labor in the Middle East, and it entrenched US power in international relations (Rubrick & Watts, 2020). Thus, while President Obama's emphasis in foreign policy had been US retrenchment, humanitarian assistance, and counterterrorism, President Trump's position under the "America First" policy was to prioritize US economy and investment above all (Lantis, 2020). This vision favored Russia's interests. That is, by withdrawing the US from NATO, Syria, and territories belonging to the former Soviet Union (Russia's sphere of influence), the Trump administration eliminated any obstacles to Russia's plans and actions with regards to foreign policy (Schweller, 2018).

Although the majority of Mr. Trump's US diplomatic decisions appeared to have been advantageous for Russia, there continued to exist major disagreements on the China-Russia alliance, nonproliferation, and the role of both nations in international conflicts. For example, President Trump attempted to halt the growth of the China-Russia alliance by starting a trade war with China in 2018 through the establishment of tariffs on their imports (Schweller, 2018). Russia also considered the US withdrawal from the INF Nuclear Treaty during the Trump administration as a threat. This US decision, together with the approaching expiration of the New START Treaty and the US-NATO advanced missile defense policy, motivated Putin to

strengthen his arsenal in collaboration with China, which could result in a probable future arms race (Cimbala, 2017). Additionally, international conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan were a source of disagreement between the Trump and Putin administrations due to the American president's failure to act on his public promise of military withdrawal (Lantis, 2020). However, in comparison with the second term in the Obama administration, under Trump, the US-Russian relationship improved.

The discussion presented in the previous paragraphs clearly points to differences in the relationship between the US and Russia during the Obama and Trump administrations. The objective of this project is to analyze how these differences were portrayed in Paresh's political cartoons. Considering the significant social role that cartoons play in contemporary society, it is important to discover how the many aspects of the US-Russia relationship were depicted in this type of media to unveil the possible influence these representations might have had on American audiences.

3. METHODS

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is the framework that will be used to analyze the chosen artefacts (i.e., Paresh's political cartoons). The focus of social semiotics is the analysis of artefacts that are created in society with a particular audience in mind, with the objective of examining the resources used to create them and the creators' motivations (i.e., the message to be communicated and why the artefact has been created) (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Their communication features are analyzed in order to comment on social relations, power, significance, the interests of sign makers (or artifact creators), the imagined audience, and the social purposes realized by the artefacts (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2016). Artefacts can feature a variety of modes of communication. For example, they can be written, visual, or gestural, and every single mode has the potential to communicate meaning in a distinct manner. When modes are combined, they result in the creation of a new complete, distinct message (Bezemer, 2012). A multimodal perspective draws attention to the specific semiotic resources utilized in a given context to make meanings and then to express meaning (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016).

Modes can be defined as the foundation of a social semiotic analysis. Modes are the cultural resources used to make meaning (Bezemer, 2012). When different modes are combined, multimodality comes into place. This occurs when artefact creators have the sense that a single mode will not effectively communicate their intended message, and, thus, decide to resort to multiple modes to convey their specific ideas and overall message. This is the case of cartoonist Paresh, who usually makes use of three modes to convey meaning in his cartoons: the written

mode (typography, font, and language), the visual mode (color, location of elements, prominence or salience), and the gestural mode (posture, facial expressions, gaze, and clothing). These are the modes on which the present analysis will focus. Since the purpose of this project is to uncover the similarities and differences in Paresh's cartoon representations of the US-Russian relationship during the Obama and Trump Administrations, social semiotics provides the appropriate tools to achieve this objective. That is, the framework focuses on the study of meaning in artifacts created in a social context, and cartoons are examples of this type of ensemble (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2016).

3.2 Analysis

For this project, Van Leeuwen's (2005) concepts and methodology within social semiotics will be utilized. This particular approach was chosen because the artefacts in this project feature the same modes as those analyzed originally by Van Leeuwen and which resulted in the conceptualizations that will be applied in this work. Van Leeuwen's artefacts combined the written, visual, and gestural modes of communication, and so do Paresh's cartoons. The analysis to be undertaken will consist of three steps. First, it will be determined which semiotic resources are used in the three prevailing modes of communication (i.e., written, visual, and gestural) in each political cartoon. The second step of the analysis will uncover the kind of interaction among the resources and modes. The first aspect to be considered will be *framing*, which refers to the creation of either a "sense of disconnection... [or] connection between the elements of a semiotic artifact by means of frame lines, spaces, or discontinuities... [or] the absence of framing devices or by means of similarities between the elements" (Van Leeuwen, p.

277). This step will be followed by the classification of the relationship among modes in terms of the following:

- *Segregation*: When “two or more elements occupy entirely different [spaces, and therefore], they should be seen as belonging to different orders” (Van Leeuwen, p. 13).
- *Separation*: When “two or more elements are separated by empty space, and this suggests that they should be seen as similar in some respects and different in others” (Van Leeuwen, p. 13).
- *Integration*: When “the text and picture occupy the same space- either the text is integrated in (for example, superimposed on) the pictorial space, or the picture in the textual space” (Van Leeuwen, p. 13).

The analysis will also consider the relationship between the visual and gestural modes and the written mode taking into account Van Leeuwen’s (2005) conceptualizations for the determination of the connections between image and text. The interaction between these modes will be considered in terms of *elaboration*, which refers to the ways in which text or image might further the message expressed by the other mode. For example, when an image makes the meaning conveyed by the text more specific, there is *specification*. On the other hand, if the text makes the message communicated by an image more specific, there is *explanation*. In the case that the image and the text complement each other (i.e., balance each other), there is *anchorage*.

In the final stage, the analysis will focus on the establishment of the connection between artefact and artist. That is, the objective of this step will be to identify the message conveyed by Paresh in connection with his background and his intended audience. The procedures described

in this section constitute the usual course of action for artefact analysis in social semiotics (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2016).

3.3 Artifacts

The artifacts analyzed in the study consisted of 36 political cartoons by the artist Paresh Nath about the US and Russia relationship. These were originally published in different mainstream American magazines and newspapers, but they were later disseminated digitally on the website *Political Cartoons*. These digital versions were the ones used in this study. Eighteen cartoons made reference to the Obama administration, and the other 18, to Trump’s term. Each cartoon’s title and year of publication is presented in Table 1. The results of the analysis are discussed in the following section.

Table 1. Artefacts Analyzed

<i>Cartoons on the Obama Administration</i>	
<i>Title of the Cartoon</i>	<i>Year of Publication</i>
<i>UN Sanctions on Iran</i>	2010
<i>US-Russia Cut Arms</i>	2010
<i>Moving Disarmament</i>	2011
<i>US-Russia Trade</i>	2011
<i>Disarmament Dream</i>	2012
<i>US-Russia in Syria</i>	2013
<i>Obama and Putin</i>	2013
<i>Obama and Putin Policy</i>	2014
<i>Anti-Terror Strategy</i>	2014

<i>Threatening Russia</i>	2014
<i>Ukraine Game</i>	2014
<i>Obama Policy</i>	2015
<i>US Forces in Syria</i>	2015
<i>Obama Doctrine of Restraint</i>	2016
<i>NATO and Russian Threat</i>	2016
<i>Obama Foreign Policy</i>	2016
<i>Obama's Nuclear Promises</i>	2016
<i>Russia and Syria</i>	2017
<i>Cartoons on the Trump Administration</i>	
<i>Title of the Cartoon</i>	<i>Year of Publication</i>
<i>Russia and the US Election</i>	2016
<i>Putin's Investment in the USA</i>	2017
<i>NATO Defense Spending</i>	2017
<i>US-Russia Policy</i>	2018
<i>Trump Foreign Affairs</i>	2018
<i>Trump-Putin Summit</i>	2018
<i>Russia-China Military Drill</i>	2018
<i>Russia-China Ties</i>	2018
<i>Trump's Accomplishments</i>	2018
<i>US Nuclear Posture</i>	2018
<i>Bombing for Peace</i>	2018
<i>Trump's War on Terror</i>	2018
<i>Syria War Game</i>	2019
<i>Trump and Obama in Syria</i>	2019
<i>INF Treaty and Europe</i>	2019

<i>START Treaty at Risk</i>	2019
<i>NATO 70th Anniversary</i>	2019
<i>NATO at 70</i>	2019

4. RESULTS

4.1. Cartoons on the Obama Administration

The results of the analysis reveal that much of Obama's main diplomatic concerns with respect are reflected in Paresh's cartoons. From the cartoons of Obama's first presidential term analyzed, it can be observed that the US was interested in establishing a close relationship with Russia through their mutual consensus in the UN Security Council decisions (e.g., *UN Sanctions on Iran*), reducing nuclear proliferation (e.g., *Moving Disarmament*, *US-Russia Cut Arms*, *Disarmament Dream*), and enhancing economic and trade investments (e.g., *US-Russia Trade*). Paresh's cartoons on Obama's second term captured the changes discussed in the second section of this paper. That is, the artifacts analyzed highlight Obama's efforts to negotiate with Russia and the difficulties faced by the American president to achieve this goal (e.g., *Obama and Putin*). Additionally, the analysis also revealed that Paresh understood that the US and Russia relationship had become quite weak based on the presidents' diplomatic differences on international intervention and foreign policy. To show these disagreements, the cartoonist chose to highlight the Syria war, anti-terror strategies, NATO relations, and Russia's invasion of the Ukraine (e.g., *Obama and Putin Policy*, *Anti-Terror Strategy*, *Threatening Russia*, *Ukraine Game*, *NATO Russian Threat*, *Russia and Syria*). In both the cartoons during the first and second administration, Paresh appears to portray President Obama as a man of peace (albeit not very successful), an arm controller, and pragmatic and cooperative figure with regards to international affairs and decisions.

A clear example of some of these themes can be seen in the artifact presented in Figure 1. Three modes are present in this artifact: the written mode, the visual mode, and the gestural mode. The cartoon features two frames. The biggest one, which occupies most of the artifact, includes a combination of the three modes. This frame is segregated from a smaller one, on the top left side of the artifact. The written mode is not present in this frame, and its main visual element is a caricature of the Iran's leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He has a pair of binoculars in his hands, and he seems to be looking at the scene taking place in the bigger frame. His facial expression denotes worry, which is also emphasized by what appears to be sweat drops coming out of the top of his head. In the main frame, immediately next to the small frame, there is a building that looks like the official residence of the president of Iran based on the dry, desert-like place where it seems to be located, and the word "Iran" written in uppercase letters on the upper part of the building. This representation could also be deemed as a metonymic symbol representing not just Iran's president, but also the country itself. That is, the medieval-type architectural style of the building could be symbolic of the conservative values and politics that characterize this nation. On top of this construction, we see the president again as a smaller figure, and his nervousness is again conveyed by the sweat drops coming out of his head.



Figure 1: UN Sanctions on Iran, 2010.

In the main, bigger frame, there are four prominent figures positioned in the center of the depicted scene, and they are holding what appears to be an object with a missile shape pointing towards the “Iran” building. The four figures represent President Obama and the state representatives of Russia, the UK, and France. This idea is not only conveyed by the physical features of the representations (e.g., President Obama’s figure has big ears), but also by the names of the countries written in uppercase letters on each figure or next to them. The four heads of state are collaborating to hold the missile-like figure, which symbolizes the UN sanctions to be imposed on Iran. This is conveyed by the written text on this image. Additionally, there is a goat head on the front part of the missile-like representation. This image is usually used to symbolize democracy. Even though the figure that the four leaders are holding has a missile shape, it appears to be empty and broken, and the goat head point does not appear to be strong enough to destroy or even damage the Iran construction. Towards the left of the four figures, there is an image of another man walking towards them. The man is the Chinese leader, a fact conveyed by the text “China” in uppercase letters written on his suit. The position of his body

and the footprints behind him appear to suggest that he has gotten to the place on foot, and that he is not in a hurry to get to the other leaders.

The most prominent mode in this artifact is the visual; however, it is heavily complemented by both the gestural and written semiotic resources. That is, both the gestural aspects and the written text make the message conveyed by the images more specific, which defines the relationship among these modes as that of anchorage. All these elements contribute to convey a friendly US-Russian relationship in the United Nations Security Council at the beginning of Obama's Administration. By Russia granting its UN vote to legitimize sanctions on Iran, it secured what is diplomatically known as 'joint decision making' among the permanent members of the UN (US, Russia, Great Britain, France, and China) who unified in identifying a given state, in the case of Iran, as an aggressor and agree on the use of force or sanctions to protect international peace. The missile-shape that the four UN leaders are holding serves to also convey the idea that these leaders see Iran as a common threat, and their joint holding of the shape represents their collective efforts. This event happened as a result of the Reset Agenda signed in 2009, which was grounded in the joint commitment of both President Obama and President Medvedev to improve their relations by establishing a basis for cooperation in areas where agreement was possible (Deyarmond, 2013).

The second example, the cartoon shown in Figure 2, was published one year after the previous artifact, and it appears to denote the beginning of a less collaborative relationship between the Obama administration and the Russian president. This cartoon is designed with one frame integrating the visual, written, and gestural modes. In this case, the main visual element is a narrow and dangerous river where Uncle Sam and a big white bear are sailing in a small boat named "Disarmament Agenda." Uncle Sam, traditionally represented in festive attire, with a top

hat and pants with the colors of the American flag, is a recognized symbol of the US, while the polar bear, seen in the frame with the word “Russia” written in bold uppercase letters, is a metaphorical representation usually associated with that country. Uncle Sam is holding a sign that says, “New Start,” which represents the US desire to have a new beginning with Russia with regards to disarmament. This idea is emphasized by the words that Uncle Sam is uttering, “We must carry it forward,” and that are conveyed in the main frame in the dialogue globe coming out of his mouth. While Uncle Sam appears to be eager to move the relationship forward, the “Russia” bear does not appear to share these feelings, as he is depicted in a still position, and seems to be staring at Uncle Sam without showing much emotion.



Figure 2: Moving Disarmament, 2011.

The next prominent images in the frame are the big rocks in the shape of missiles that are obstructing the river’s passage for the small US-Russia boat. Each rock has a label, written in uppercase letters, and they all make reference to policies/issues that might affect the success of

the disarmament agenda. The labels are: “Missile Defense Issue,” “Nuclear Strategic Weapons,” and “US Tactical Nukes in Europe.” The physical features of the river also convey the idea of obstacles or a difficult journey ahead, as it is not only depicted as having strong currents (represented by the black lines symbolizing waves and whirls), but also by its zig-zag shape, the presence of other small rocks that make sailing almost impossible, and its location (between two long narrow hilltops that seem to be disintegrating). These dire images are complemented by the depiction of a dark sky towards the end of the river. These visual characterizations are suggestive of a “rocky and stormy” journey, and they symbolize the challenges in nuclear disarmament between the US and Russia.

In this artifact, the visual and written modes are the most salient, and they appear to mostly complement each other. However, the written and gestural modes also make the cartoon more specific by providing historical context and information on the attitudes of the US and Russia towards disarmament. These two modes, therefore, can be said to provide anchorage to the visual elements. The combination of the semiotic resources in this artifact serve to convey Paresh’s emphasis on the nuclear challenges in the Reset Agenda, and they also appear to predict the upcoming failure of the US and Russia relationship. That is, one of the main causes of the two countries’ failed relationship were precisely their key disagreements on missile defense and nuclear disarmament. Paresh’s characterization of the disarmament “journey” as being obstructed with gigantic nuclear rocks metaphorically, but realistically, portrays the Reset’s agenda as almost impossible to “carry forward.” And, indeed, with regards to nuclear proliferation, the US and Russia were clearly sailing in a very small and fragile boat. All the elements in this artifact foreshadowed the end of the agenda and the beginning and future of an

antagonistic relationship between the US and Russia, especially when Vladimir Putin became president.

4.2. Cartoons on the Trump Administration

Paresh's cartoons in reference to the Trump administration and its relationship with Russia reflect a drastic change in foreign policy and reinforce existing cultural stereotypes on both states. The eighteen artifacts analyzed highlight the strong connection between the Trump administration and Putin, Russia's interference with cybersecurity and its strong nuclear power, the Russia-China alliance, and Russia's greater influence over former soviet states. The themes are conveyed in artifacts such as *Russia and the US election*, *Putin's Investment in the USA*, *Russia-China Military Drill*, *Russia-China Ties*, *INF Treaty and Europe*, *START Treaty at Risk*, *NATO 70TH Anniversary*. Other cartoons focus on Russia's dominant intervention in the West and the US's extreme isolationism through the "America First" policy (e.g., *Trump Foreign Affairs*, *Trump-Putin Summit*, *Russia-China Military Drill*, *INF Treaty and Europe*, *START Treaty at Risk*, *Trump's Accomplishments*, *NATO Defense Spending*, *NATO at 70*). In his cartoons, Paresh communicates the changes in the US-Russia relation resorting to different representations and emphases. One of the most powerful ones is the change in the bear symbol for Russia. While during the Obama administration, Russia was represented as a mellow, polar bear, during the Trump administration, the bear looks more like a powerful, dangerous brown bear who bear much resemblance to the Russian leader. Also important is the change in the depiction of the American president. While Obama was mostly represented as a cooperative man, Trump is mostly presented as an impulsive, intransigent, bad-tempered, childish, and unilateralist leader, often vowing to Putin's wishes.

Paresh's new conception of Russia as a powerful and menacing bear can be clearly seen in the example shown in Figure 3. This artifact is composed of a single frame in which the visual, gestural, and written modes are combined. The setting of the cartoon is a small computer room, with four hooded figures working hastily on computers at the demand of a big bear. The main visual element is, precisely, the tall, big bear which representing Russia or, more precisely, Russian leader Vladimir Putin, as it is shown bare chested, making reference to existing Putin's photographs. The bear is also wearing military pants, alluding to Putin's training and his authoritarian government. His body position conveys the idea that he is giving orders to the people working in the room where he is. His hands are resting at his waist showing impatience, and his face denotes anger and severity, all of which are confirmed by the words he is uttering, "Come on...we can manipulate the election...". The bear is also holding a piece of paper in his left hand that reads "Clinton's missing emails" in uppercase letters. On the table next to him, there are two other pieces of paper, also with text in uppercase letters, which make reference to the democratic party, "DNC emails," and President Trump's relationship with Russia, "Trump's ties to Russia."



Figure 3: Russia and the US Election, 2016.

The people receiving orders from the bear are four hooded figures, who appear to be anonymous computer hackers due to the hoods hiding their identity and the word “Hack!” written next to three of them. Also, the use of the word “hack,” in combination with the other instances of written text, uncovers to the audience what these figures are doing and what the bear wants: To interfere with the US 2016 election in favor of Trump. Their eyes are directly set on their computer screens, and their bodies are hunched towards their keyboards. The curved lines drawn on top of their shoulders show their rapid typing movements and the big pressure they seem to be feeling. They all appear to be concentrating on the task at hand, but also seem to be stressed out. All the figures are in a discrete room, which, together with the men's hidden identity, communicates to the audience that what they are doing is secret. Towards the left of the men, on the wall, there is a small, yet distinctive image of the Russian flag surrounded by notes pinned on the same wall. The image of the flag confirms that this operation is taking place in Russia.

In this artifact, the visual and written modes are the most salient, and they appear to mostly complement each other. However, the written and gestural modes also make the cartoon more specific by providing historical context and information on Putin's goal and Russia's role in US politics. These two modes, therefore, can be said to provide anchorage to the visual elements. The combination of these modes is used by Paresh to convey a figurative representation of Russia's intervention in the 2016 election. The impatient look of the bear unveils his strong interest to derail U.S democracy and secure Trump's presidency as soon as possible. This characterization does not only depict Russia as an adversary, but also recognizes its threatening power in cybersecurity. From the confidential papers Putin appears to hold in his power, Paresh suggests that the Russian president is not afraid of using secret information belonging to another nation nor does he have any concerns to achieve his political goals, even if that means resorting to illegal methods and violating international treaties. This cartoon also reflects some of the information unveiled by the Mueller investigation (Kotkin, 2019) with respect to Russia's role in the 2016 US election.

The artifact in Figure 4 conveys the close ties between Trump and Putin. The cartoon consists of one frame composed of the visual, written, and gestural modes. The main visual elements are President Putin and former President Trump, standing in two large pieces of land, which seem to be Eastern Europe and the American continents separated by sea, yet very close to each other. This closeness is an allusion to the close relationship between these two characters, and hence Russia and the US. On the left side, President Putin is wearing a winter military coat, boots, and a winter hat with a red star at the front. This element, together with the representation of St. Basil's cathedral and the Kremlin, clearly allude to Russia and its most distinguishable symbols. Also, both the star and the Kremlin are in direct connection with Russia's, and Putin's,

Soviet Union past. The Russian president is holding a paper that reads “US Poll Hacking” in uppercase letters behind his back. While he is thanking former President Trump for the “profits” that have resulted from his investment in the Trump administration, he is pointing towards a pile of destroyed American institutions--“Justice Dept.,” “FBI,” “Undermined CIA,” “IRS,” and “Erosion of basic values.” All these demolished structures lie on top of a stone with the text “great America” written in uppercase letters.



Figure 4: Putin’s Investment in the USA, 2017.

President Trump is standing next to the destroyed institutions, wearing a traditional black business suit, which is connotative of his popular image as a rich businessman in America. He is standing on the opposite shore as Putin, and he seems to be smiling. Trump also appears to have a sledgehammer in his left hand, which he might have used to destroy the institutions on the right, and his facial expression and bodily position convey he is proud of what he has done.

The semiotic elements in this artifact reflect how beneficial it was for President Putin to have Donald Trump as the victorious 45th president of the US. The symbolic destruction of American institutions such as the CIA, the FBI, the Justice Department represents Trump's lack of support and antagonism towards them, which resulted in the weakening of these organisms and ultimately protected Putin from legally severe repercussions for his interference in the election (Miller, Jaffe, & Rucker, 2017). It is clear that Paresh interprets this interference as an investment for Putin. Additionally, Paresh's inclusion of the phrase "erosion of basic values" emphasizes the inhumane and discriminatory social policies that characterized the Trump administration and that affected the lives of a great number of people, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis suggest that the cartoons are strongly tied to the historical context of the US and Russia relationship during the Obama and Trump administrations. In the beginning stages of the first Obama administration, Paresh's works depict a friendly relationship between the American and Russian leaders, featuring them, for example, shaking hands while destroying their missiles (e.g., *US-Russia Cut Arms*) and supporting each other on diplomatic decisions (e.g., *UN Sanctions on Iran*). However, the artist also predicts the deterioration of the relationship caused by both countries' eventual disagreement on nuclear disarmament (e.g., *Moving Disarmament, Disarmament Dream*). Additionally, when President Putin comes to office during the second term of the Obama administration, and Russia starts to be regarded as a rival, Paresh communicates these changes in his representation of both the US (a weaker, stressed Obama—e.g., *US-Russia in Syria*) and Russian (a more aggressive, stronger Putin—e.g., *Ukraine Game*) presidents. In the final years of the Obama administration, Paresh starts connecting Putin and Russia with the country's strong military influence and illegal activities such as the annexation of Ukraine in 2014 (e.g., *Obama and Putin Policy, Threatening Russia, Ukraine Game*).

When Donald Trump wins the 2016 election, the relationship between US and Russia becomes a focal topic for discussion in international affairs, and this is reflected in Paresh's work. The artist introduces the Trump presidency as the result of Russia's interference in the US election (e.g., *Russia and the US election*), and he views President Trump as an "investment" for Vladimir Putin (e.g., *Putin's Investment in the USA*). In Paresh's cartoons during the Trump

administration, Russia is symbolically represented as a giant, aggressive, bad-tempered bear, with pointy fangs and a menacing expression, wearing military uniforms and the traditional Ushanka hat (e.g., *Russia and the US election*, *Russia-China Ties*, *NATO 70th Anniversary*). Likewise, the visual representation of President Putin is often connected with symbols characteristic of an autocratic leader having influence both over the US and the West, with the assistance of President Trump and the power resulting from Russia's alliance with China (e.g., *Trump Foreign Affairs*, *US- Russia Policy*, *Trump-Putin Summit*, *Russia-China Military Drill*, *Russia-China Ties*).

The analysis of the cartoons also reveals a difference between the way in which Paresh represents President Obama and President Trump. While Obama is often presented as a collaborative leader, Trump is depicted as individualistic and subservient to Putin. That is, when there is some kind of interaction between the US and Russia, most cartoons depict Obama accompanied by either other state leaders or his political party (e.g., *UN Sanctions on Iran*, *Obama and Putin Policy*, *Ukraine Game*). In contrast, Trump is mostly by himself in situations related to Russia, and he is shown as making fully unilateral decisions (e.g., *Putin's investment in the USA*, *US-Russia Policy*, *Trump's Accomplishments*, *Trump's War on Terror*).

The analysis completed in this work clearly shows Paresh's deep understanding of American foreign politics even though he does not live in the United States nor is he a US citizenship. His in-depth knowledge of international politics could be related to his work in the Indian newspapers *The National Herald* and *Khaleej Times*. These two papers are published in English, and focus mostly on international political issues, business, economy, and UN-related matters (Team, 2013). This could explain Paresh's expertise on world politics. Additionally, this artist believes that "cartoons may be funny and hilarious but to create them is serious business...

[since] cartoons are a powerful medium to convey a message” (Team, 2013). The comprehensive information communicated by Paresh’s cartoons clearly attests to this characterization of his work and his commitment to addressing important issues through humor.

The representations in Paresh’s cartoons also point to the artist’s ideology. The comparison between his illustrations of President Obama and of President Trump reveals a more positive view towards the former, conveyed not only through the visual mode (e.g., collaborative vs. individualistic behaviors), but also through gestural semiotic resources. For example, while Obama is generally represented as a man in sober clothes with measured behavior, Trump is sometimes drawn as an object (e.g., a roly-poly toy vowing to Putin—*Trump Foreign Affairs*) and/or with cruel, angry, or childish facial expressions and gestures. Additionally, Paresh’s illustrations of Russia are more positive during President Medvedev’s administration than during President Putin’s, which suggests the artist’s negative bias towards the latter and his policies.

The ideological trends present in Paresh’s works are conveyed to the audiences of the media sources in which they are published. Since most of these sources have a wide readership and reach even beyond the United States, their radius of influence is broad. Therefore, the artist’s ideology and interpretation of important contemporary political issues could have influenced his audiences’ perceptions of the geopolitical world and could have resulted in opinions and behaviors with present and future consequences, such as elections. It is thus undoubtful that Paresh’s cartoons constitute a clear example of the power of this type of artifacts and reflect Hallet and Hallet’s (2012) characterization of them as “the encyclopedias of popular culture” (p. 59), at least in regard to the US-Russian relationship during the Obama and Trump administrations.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Paresh's political cartoons presented in this research provides examples of how this type of artifact can convey an artist's interpretations and ideology of a particular issue and, as a result, can influence their audience's perceptions toward it. In this thesis, the application of multimodal social semiotics uncovered how Paresh's work during the Obama and Trump administration revealed his in-depth knowledge and understanding of the international geopolitical context in regard to the U.S and Russia relationship, as well as his biases towards the two countries' leaders. Through the use of the written, visual, and gestural modes of communication, this artist communicated to his audience a carefully constructed analysis and interpretation of international politics which made his cartoons informative, albeit also subjective and critical.

The multimodal social semiotics analysis completed in this work resulted in the discovery of the ways in which an artist can resort to different modes of communication to embed this work with symbolism and to convey his view and interpretation of contemporary events. This thesis showed that the use of social semiotics can shed light on how human artifacts can be constructed in a certain way for a specific purpose and motivation. Thus, this type of analysis could be applied in future studies with similar artifacts to the ones analyzed in this work to continue our exploration of the possibilities behind modes of communication and multimodal meaning.

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