Brigitte Vassort-Rousset (ed.), Building Sustainable Couples in International Relations. A Strategy towards Peaceful Cooperation

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Brigitte Vassort-Rousset’s edited volume is a very welcome contribution to scholarship on bilateral relations in international politics. Such dyadic relationships in many ways remain a fundamental building block of international relations and are crucial to dynamics of cooperation and conflict in the international arena. Nevertheless, they have traditionally been rather marginalised in grand theorising about international politics as well as in the analysis of foreign policy. While the mainstream paradigms in International Relations have focused attention primarily on the systemic level of analysis, the strongest contributions of the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis have been in exploring the role of domestic actors and processes and in providing inside-out explanations of foreign policy. Bilateral relations, in contrast, are firmly located on the interactionist level of analysis in between the macro-level of the international system and the micro-level of the interacting units. They can neither be fully explained from the structural characteristics of the international system, nor be reduced solely to the attributes of actors. Rather, the analysis of bilateral relations is most promising if it follows the ‘relational turn’ in International Relations and acknowledges the causal and constitutive significance of the patterns and practice of such relationships.

This is precisely the analytical starting point of Building Sustainable Couples in International Relations. The volume enriches the literature on bilateral relations both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, it introduces the metaphor of ‘international couples’ to describe and understand a particular subset of dyadic relationships. Empirically, it explores how and under what conditions such couples can succeed in promoting peaceful cooperation. Building on a series of panels at successive annual conventions of the International Studies Association, the volume brings together a broad range of case studies from different world regions, including the French-German couple and Britain’s relations to some of its former colonies as well as less studied relationships, for example, in Latin America and South Asia. The empirical chapters discuss how ‘peaceful couples’ can be built and maintained, what the main obstacles and ‘grounds for divorce’ in such relationships are and to

what extent they have broader regional and international implications. The cases go beyond the traditional diplomacy of intergovernmental relations and emphasise the significance of mid-level political elites and civil society in fostering rich and enduring relationships.

What perhaps stands out as the volume’s most notable innovation is its suggestion to study international partnerships in analogy to interpersonal couples. The metaphor of ‘international couples’ refers to dyadic international relationships that are characterised by their “duration, intensity and unconditionality” (p. 249) and in which the partners strive for “significant ends” (p. 9), in particular with regard to security cooperation and peaceful international transformation. While this perspective clearly has overlaps with related concepts such as ‘special relationships’, ‘friendship’ or ‘enduring rivalries’, it still puts a different angle on such ‘special’ bilateral relations, although some more discussion of how international couples go beyond, in particular, scholarship on ‘friendship’ would have served to spell out the conceptual contribution of the volume even better.

Most notably, the added value of the ‘couples’ metaphor is that it evokes an affective dimension of dyadic international relationships. This links in with research on the role of emotions in international politics and foreign policy which has arguably been underplayed in existing research on bilateral relationships that has focused more on identities, interdependence and interests. The metaphor of ‘international couples’ also serves as a reminder of the intersubjective nature of bilateral relations and highlights the stabilising effects of routinised dyadic relationships on the self-identities of the actors involved. In this sense, it would be fruitful in future research to elaborate in more depth on the role of ontological security needs in forming and sustaining international couples. At the same time, the concept of ‘international couples’ is meant to bridge identity-based perspectives and more conventional materialist perspectives on bilateral relations. Specifically, partners valuate couples both in terms of mutual perceptions of each other’s identity and as a power multiplier on the international stage.

As for the broader impact of international couples on international politics, one of the most intriguing arguments put forward in the volume is that such couples provide an important source of trust in interstate relations which serves to facilitate peaceful international cooperation. Setting the scene for this argument, Anna Caffarena’s very thoughtful chapter identifies ‘deficits of trust’ in contemporary international relations as a major component of the shortage of social capital in the international system holding back interstate cooperation. These deficits in trust result from the short timeframes and myopic decision-making of international actors as well as from the narrow and exclusive definition of their interests which fails to encapsulate the interests of potential cooperation partners. International couples, in turn, can facilitate the production of interstate capital and trust between partners in at least two ways. First, they broaden the time horizons of international actors and allow for cooperation on the basis of diffuse reciprocity because partners expect

and desire their relationships to continue into the indefinite future. Second, the affective component of international couples as well as the shared ends and regular communication between them encourage broader definitions of interests which integrate the perspectives and priorities of the other.

Importantly, the argument presented in the volume then moves on to suggest that the trust produced within international couples may have positive effects on peaceful cooperation beyond the couple itself by way of increasing the overall social capital in international politics. Such ‘trust spillovers’ work through creating network capital which allows partners to partake in each other’s international partnerships and to develop trust with the ‘partners of the partner’. A possibility that would be worth exploring further, however, is that the ‘bonding’ between partners within a couple might have negative, rather than positive externalities for broader international cooperation. Such adverse effects might arguably be triggered by the demarcation between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to a partnership and become reinforced by processes of ‘negative othering’ which are sometimes integral to ‘couple building’. A possible example for such negative externalities from international couples is discussed in Yves-Heng Lim’s chapter on the China-India rivalry. This suggests that the development of a ‘stable marriage’ between India and the US may actually reinforce the antagonism between India and China. Also, Mélanie Albaret and Delphine Placidi-Frot’s chapter on dyads in the United Nations appears to caution against overly optimistic expectations that trust which has been developed within couples will spillover to multilateral contexts. In fact, the chapter makes a convincing case that dyadic couples play an ever less significant role inside the UN system and that multilateralism is unlikely to function on the basis of such couples. While mistrust stands out as a major obstacle to successful multilateral cooperation (p. 29), international couples seem unlikely to come to the rescue. It would be particularly interesting for future research to establish if this finding also holds for the European Union and, more broadly, what the ‘international couples’ metaphor has to add to the study of European integration.

In terms of maintaining and further developing international couples, the key argument presented in various contributions to the volume is that keeping alive such partnerships is a multidimensional and multilevel endeavour. On the level of official interstate diplomacy, the construction and nurturing of couples critically rely on policy reciprocation and the exercise of self-restraint. This may, in turn, depend on the agency of individual political leaders, as Elise Féron points out in her chapter on the UK’s relations to its former colonies in the European Union. In particular, this chapter highlights the importance of symbolic gestures and the politics of apology to overcome the legacy of the past and to build partnerships for the future. At the same time, the volume points to the significance of sub-state and non-state actors in fostering rich and resilient international couples. This point is forcefully made, for example, in Noe Cornago’s chapter on sub-state diplomacy in Latin American couples. In contrast, Jean-Jacques Roche’s chapter describes the French-German couple as a partnership that rests solely on political elites and is not reflected in strong mutual affinities on the level of general publics. This finding, however, is not entirely convincing because it appears to be derived from too limited and narrow
empirical indicators and does not engage with previous research on Franco-German relations which has precisely emphasised their ‘parapublic underpinnings’.

Overall, the considerable added value of this collection primarily comes from the combination of its theoretical ambition to further the study of peaceful bilateral relations in international politics and its rich set of empirical case studies. To be sure, the application of the ‘international couples’ metaphor could have been more consistent across the individual contributions and its extension to cases of ‘divorce’ in the last part of the book seems to stretch the concept somewhat. But any such ‘fuzziness’ is more than made up for by the originality of the book’s analytical angle. In any case, how fruitful the ‘international couples’ perspective will prove to be for our understanding of ‘special’ dyadic relations in international politics will be for future comparative research to decide.