Whisky Business

By: Tyler Whitney

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Bottle of Dewars

White Label Scotch Whisky

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This past week, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and President Trump discussed, among other things, tariffs on Scotch whisky (spelled ‘whiskey’ in the US and Ireland). That two powerful world leaders would take time to discuss the economic destiny of a beverage is a testament to the geopolitical significance of networks and flows.

Tied into the relationships created by these flows is the implication of alliance (or at least close cooperation) between the participants connected by the network. This is illustrated by the White House statement following the call saying the two states would continue to strengthen their ties “through a robust bilateral free trade agreement once the United Kingdom leaves the EU.” That the US hopes to enhance its trade relationship with the UK as the latter distances itself from Europe is an acknowledgment of the reinforcing role flows play between geopolitical allies. Flows have a compelling influence on diplomacy. The popularity of Scotch whisky around the world requires the British government to develop a political relationship with every place that Scotch is demanded. The diplomatic channels and the flow of Whisky itself then become ‘mutually constitutive,’ meaning they contribute to each other’s existence, or each one makes the other possible. The flow of whisky exports can also be used as diplomatic leverage. Seemingly to encourage the UK’s exit from the European Union, the US attached a 25% tariff on Scotch whisky to retaliate against the European Union’s economic decisions regarding large aircraft. Flows weave themselves into the fabric of geopolitics and become essential considerations.

This case illustrates how networks and flows link with another aspect of geopolitics: the fame of Scotch whisky itself is an example of bottom-up national identity. ‘Bottom-up’ means that it was mostly constructed by the beliefs of everyday people, rather than government declarations and initiatives. The Scottish are fiercely proud of their whisky distilleries, associating the drink with independence and Scottish identity. In order to protect the purity and reputation of the Scotch label, only whisky’s distilled in Scotland are legally allowed to carry the coveted label of

‘Scotch,’ and the British government requires all Scotch to have an alcohol content of at least 40%.