

Monkey Cage Analysis

So Trump's meeting Kim Jong Un after all. Here's why face-to-face diplomacy matters.

By Marcus Holmes and
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Editor's note: This post originally ran on May 24, 2018, when the North Korea summit was canceled. With the North Korea summit back on, here is an updated post on how face-to-face diplomacy matters.

After some [twists and turns](#), President Trump will meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore after all. The summit will be a historic first between a sitting U.S. president and the leader of North Korea.

Does face-to-face diplomacy really matter?

Analysts [disagree sharply](#) in their [assessments](#) of what the [meeting might accomplish](#) and even on whether [engaging face-to-face is wise](#). Here's what we know about the effectiveness of face-to-face diplomacy, based on recent research in this field.

1. Trump and Kim might learn from what they say — but also what they see face-to-face

Fear and mistrust can lead to [otherwise avoidable conflict](#). Determining the intentions of allies and adversaries is one of the biggest challenges in foreign policy. Successful bargaining often requires one side to accurately understand the other's intentions. Leaders and diplomats have long argued that sitting down face-to-face is the best way to gain this understanding.

Here's why: Decades of research in sociology, psychology and neuroscience explain how we make inferences about people's intentions [not just from what they say](#) but also from how they act. [Facial](#) expressions, [microexpressions](#), [emotions](#), tone of voice, body posture, movements, winks and twitches all give clues about a person's mental state. And policymakers take this evidence seriously.

[Keren Yarhi-Milo](#), one of the authors of this article, argues that leaders use face-to-face interactions to gain information and [impressions](#) about the intentions of their counterparts because such encounters are vivid. Literature in social psychology has long shown that information that is vivid, personalized and emotionally engaging will play a larger role in the decision-making process than information that is more informative but less vivid to the decision-maker.

There may be good reason for this. Because many expressive behaviors are involuntary, or difficult to control, they may serve as examples of what Robert Jervis has called '[indices](#)' of intentions — the signals of intent that are more believable because they are harder to fake.

Neuroscience provides insights into many of these findings. Drawing on research on the philosophy of mind and social neuroscience, [Marcus Holmes, who also co-wrote this article](#), argues that we put ourselves in the position of others in face-to-face interactions, [simulating in our own minds](#) our counterparts' sincere, specific intentions.

2) Successful summits take empathy

Summits are more likely to produce positive outcomes when leaders are able to subjectively feel where the other is coming from in terms of positions and interests. This process of empathizing with the other — not necessarily sympathizing — is crucial to overcoming what Ole Holsti has called the "[inherent bad faith model](#)." Leaders have to believe that the other side is willing to negotiate in good faith, or they will discount any concessions as meaningless.

In 2000, [President Bill Clinton](#) learned the importance of empathy when the highly anticipated Camp David summit between Israeli leader Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat ended in disappointment. "As usual," Clinton recounted, "[each leader saw his own position more clearly than he saw the other side](#)."

2/24/2018 So Trump's meeting Kim says he after all, there's only face-to-face diplomacy matters. The Washington Post
In [our research](#), we found that the inability or unwillingness of the leaders to understand their counterparts doomed the summit from the start. Although the 1978 Camp David talks featured two leaders — Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin — with similar antipathy, the big difference was an empathetic mediator, Jimmy Carter.

We found that Carter was able to work individually with Sadat and Begin in face-to-face meetings, gradually building empathy and communication between the two. Even if the adversaries at a summit are not empathetic, an empathic mediator can make the crucial difference in bridging two foes who are unable to see the other's point of view.

3) Summits can build trust

Face-to-face diplomacy can ultimately transform relationships, turning enemies into partners, by [building trust](#). [Nicholas Wheeler](#) argues that face-to-face diplomacy allows leaders to test an intuition that another leader is trustworthy.

The face-to-face diplomacy between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, beginning with the November 1985 Geneva summit, illustrates this process. Upon shaking hands with Gorbachev for the first time, Reagan later recalled, he “[looked into his smile](#)” and sensed that he “had been right and felt a surge of optimism.” Wheeler argues that these interactions ultimately led to both sides trusting each other enough that they no longer considered the risks entailed with cooperating.

Testing trustworthiness through face-to-face interaction is not foolproof. After meeting Vladimir Putin at the 2001 Slovenia Summit, George W. Bush famously declared, “[I was able to get a sense of his soul](#).” But U.S.-Russian relations soon deteriorated. Historical examples of high-profile summits that go wrong, [from Munich to Yalta](#), loom large.

4) Intelligence provides important context in face-to-face meetings

Since Kim came to power, the CIA has probably produced dozens of intelligence assessments of the young North Korean leader. Those assessments should be of great interest to presidents in general but are particularly valuable before a face-to-face meeting.

Indeed, as [Holmes and Yarhi-Milo note](#), before convening the Camp David summit, Carter pored over [psychological profiles](#) of Begin and Sadat. By Carter's own admission, these profiles helped him understand how to approach, persuade and maneuver the leaders into accepting a negotiated settlement. [Ronald Reagan similarly prepared](#) and practiced for the summit with his Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock.

In recent months, [Trump has been at odds with the intelligence community](#) and reportedly doesn't schedule [regular presidential briefings](#). But Trump's new secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, a former CIA director, [recently met with Kim](#). And Trump also met with South Korean [President Moon Jae-in](#) this week to discuss the negotiations.

But Trump said [publicly](#) last week that “I don't think I have to prepare very much. It's about the attitude. It's about willingness to get things done.”

While a good-faith attitude and political will are certainly important, it remains to be seen whether Trump and Kim can realize the potential benefits of a face-to-face meeting.

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