


6-9-2018

# Will the Trump-Kim Meeting Go Nuclear? The Role of First Impressions

Editor

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## Recommended Citation

Editor (2018) "Will the Trump-Kim Meeting Go Nuclear? The Role of First Impressions," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol18/iss1/1>

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## Title: Will the Trump-Kim Meeting Go Nuclear? The Role of First Impressions

“Just my touch, my feel...That’s what I do. You know, the way they say you now if you’re going to like somebody in the first five seconds. Did you ever hear that one? Well, I think that very quickly I’ll know whether or not something good is going to happen.” This quote has been attributed to the current President of the United States (U. S.) as he described an upcoming meeting with Supreme Leader Kim Jon-un of the Democratic Republic of North Korea (D.R.N.K.) (1). That impression—even first impressions—are judged as important and accurate by many people should not be surprising. For example, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century French Impressionism sought to capture a feeling or experience more essentially accurate than objective representation. But whether based on an anecdote, a description, formal briefings, or those first fleeting moments of actual meeting, is there a scientific foundation to the U. S. President’s take on impressions?

Some researchers have posited that Caucasians’ impressions of the faces of other Caucasians lead to judgments of how approachable, attractive, and dominant that other might be. From these judgments, further ones develop as to what intentions and capabilities that other might harbor. These researchers posit that impression-based judgment has evolved through time, because it’s useful in determining both the threat from and sexual value of another person—as unlikely as sexual congress might be during a meeting between two political adversaries. And these findings also seem to apply when one person is Caucasian and the other Asian (2). From this, one might speculate on what facial cues the U.S. and D.R.N.K. leaders might use and the subsequent logic linking their judgment. But this speculation would take us beyond reputable scientific findings, even though there is a thriving research area on using facial cues in recognizing emotion (3). It is not beyond speculation that each leader will present physical and attitudinal looks throughout the meeting intended to convey degrees of approachability, attractiveness, and dominance.

But especially germane for many political leaders is research on how *dark tetrad* traits—viz., subclinical psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sadism—affect first impressions and accuracy. Research suggests a positive correlation between one’s ranking on the dark tetrad and perceiving another person less distinctively, less accurately, but more negatively. However, more work needs to be done to parse significant differences among the dark tetrad traits and first impressions (4). It would seem as if both leaders might be on track for a train wreck, especially if commonly used media descriptors such as *thin-skinned* and *hypersensitive to slight* do validly apply to these leaders.

A third research area explores the relationship between how accurate people *think* their impressions are versus the impressions’ actual accuracy. Findings suggest that people who strongly believe their impressions of others are accurate are, indeed accurate—as long as the impressions do not characterize how people are in general. For the latter, impressions are no more accurate than they would be regardless of how confident people are in their accuracy (5). So as each leader makes special cases of the other,

more impression accuracy may be likely. And based on the degree to which mass media and intelligence sources attended to by the leaders have created expectations of the other being a special case, impression accuracy may be improved.

Additional research areas suggest that one's first impressions of another will be both more positive and more accurate if one perceives the other as more individually attractive (6); that many people possess what is called *idiographic meta-accuracy*—i.e., accuracy in detecting which traits other people attribute to them based on first impressions (7); that (a) the more similar one's first impressions of another are to that other person's self-impressions and (b) the more one likes another based on first impressions will both have positive effects on furthering positive relationship development...with liking's effects continuing over a longer period of time than and operating independently of similarity (8); and—of interest to those with unflattering opinions of political leaders—that the first impressions of well-adjusted people, compared with less adjusted people, are not more accurate in identifying the unique characteristics of other people (9). Attempts to integrate these findings may be complex enough to prohibit the leaders' gaming the meeting but instead to just operate on...their first impressions. And, perhaps, if scientific and professional advisors are listened to, each leader might be hesitant to use the findings because of sample size, ecological validity, and many other factors affecting the findings' replicability (10).

But in conclusion, while the various political, politico-military, economic, and security consequences of the upcoming meeting will soon play out, there do appear to be psychological factors based on first impressions affecting the art and science of the deal.

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**Keywords:** Conflict, Impressions, Negotiations, Peace, Nuclear Weapons

**Abstract/Description:** How might the upcoming meeting of U.S. President Donald Trump and D.R.N.K Kim Jong-un be affected by their first impressions of each other? This article describes some findings and implications of relevant psychological research.

**Disciplines:** Other Psychology, Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense Studies, International Relations, Asian Studies

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