

The Trump-Kim Summit : Is “attitude” more important than preparation?

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Here in Singapore, along with the rest of the world, we await the Trump-Kim Summit scheduled for Tuesday 12 June. What can we expect? While we may have learned to expect the unexpected from these two leaders, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un, recent media reports have highlighted one apparently predictable feature of Trump’s negotiation approach. As a CNN reporter framed it: “Trump picks ‘attitude’ over prep work ahead of Singapore summit”. In relation to the Summit, Trump has reportedly said, it is about attitude not preparation. Earlier this year as he rejected Japan’s proposal for a tripartite co-ordination of the proposed Summit, Trump apparently told Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that he prefers to follow his “gut” rather than formal preparations.

So what do we know about the role of “gut feeling” or intuition in negotiation. In his groundbreaking book, Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow, Daniel Kahneman explores the biases of our intuition. These are produced by fast thinking, which, Kahneman explains, relies on sets of assumptions (heuristics) to help us reach conclusions quickly and “intuitively”. Here are just two of Kahneman’s heuristics that may have relevance for Tuesday’s much anticipated meeting. I will refer to them as “traps” because for negotiators that is what they represent.

1. **The Affect Trap:** “People let their likes and dislikes determine their beliefs

about the world” writes Kahneman in chapter 9. What is the potential for error here? Well, we could conceivably allow our emotional preferences to cloud our judgment. This could then lead to a situation where we either under-estimated or over-estimate risks and benefits. In other words, an over-reliance on the chemistry between two lead negotiators could tempt negotiators to be less thorough with reality testing and lazy with their due diligence. This is where it can be useful to have a team behind the lead negotiator to follow through with the evaluation of options and offers on the table as well as statements and assertions by the other negotiating side.

2. The Over-confidence Trap: When something “feels right” it does not necessarily make it right. Rather the strong “gut feeling” tends to make us over-confident. In Kahneman words, “[e]xtreme predictions and a willingness to predict rare events from weak evidence are both manifestations of fast thinking.” What happens here is that in the absence of evidence to back-up our view our emotional brain goes into overdrive and we create stories that appear coherent out of scraps of data. Kahneman explains that this is how substitution works.

So the message is to beware of these negotiator traps. But this doesn’t mean that you can never trust your feelings. While there is no substitute for preparation, fellow blogger, Charlie Woods reminds us that the ability to improvise in a negotiation remains critical: The beauty of the mediation process is that it has the flexibility to allow this improvisation, while providing a tune [a structure] to return to should you begin to lose your way!

Readers, you will notice that I am posting this before the 12 June 2018. Like you, I am curious about the outcome of the Trump-Kim Summit.