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### Author

Plithides, Max

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# WHY SUMMIT OPTICS MAY HELP DE-ESCALATE PUBLIC APPETITE FOR CONFLICT

Max Plithides

## Summary

As competition between democracies and autocratic adversaries such as North Korea, Iran, Russia, and China intensifies, democratic publics may increasingly pressure their politicians to take a more confrontational stance. The implications are dangerous. Public pressure for confrontation during the Cold War caused numerous foreign policy fiascos.<sup>1</sup> Public pressure also at times undermined the broad political unity necessary for concluding diplomatic agreements—even between democratic allies.<sup>2</sup> How then, as the world enters a new era of great power competition, can public pressure and anger be defused and foreign policy put on a more rational footing?

This policy brief, part of a series on great power competition, argues that bilateral summits with autocratic leaders may have a key role to play in shifting the public's collective emotional ethos. It analyzes results from a large-scale survey experiment, designed around the historic 2018 Singapore Summit, which represented the first-ever meeting of the leaders of North Korea and the United States and was preceded by months of saber rattling.<sup>3</sup> According to conventional logic the Summit was worthless: It produced a joint communiqué with “no concrete specifics”<sup>4</sup> and had no effect on President Trump's approval rating.<sup>5</sup> Yet evidence shows that joint photographs from the Summit reduced bellicosity in American public opinion towards North Korea by allowing President Trump to act as a visual empathetic mediator. The Singapore Summit thus broadly evinces the potential value of bilateral summits to reduce tensions with autocratic adversaries.

SERIES ON GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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## Why Summit Optics Matter

Images affect our perception of events at least as much as objective reality.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true in foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing the influence that photographs have, public diplomacy scholars argue that press photographs taken at summits represent an important part of the “public relations” (PR) aspect of American diplomacy.<sup>8</sup> They exist, moreover, within a package of activities that come with any visit by an American head of state.<sup>9</sup> Yet this logic falls apart in the context of bilateral summits with autocrats. Autocrats can carefully craft the image that they wish their own citizens to take away from summits, making it hard for American leaders to achieve their PR goals.<sup>10</sup> If American participation at summits cannot affect public opinion in autocratic countries, then why should presidents attend them?

My research indicates that presidents should meet autocratic adversaries to shift American thinking. Essentially, American presidents can conduct “reverse public diplomacy,” which summits uniquely facilitate by providing opportunities for joint photographs. Joint photos, in turn, allow presidents to act as photographic, visual mediators for emotional empathy in front of the press.

Emotional mediation works through three distinct causal pathways. First, it has the effect of reducing Americans’ fear, by humanizing the other.



Kim and Trump shaking hands at the red carpet during the DPRK–USA Singapore Summit. Credit: Shealah Craighead, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Second, it creates hope and makes a breakthrough appear desirable. Finally, it alleviates cognitive impediments to strategic understanding, making a negotiated diplomatic breakthrough more possible in the long-term. Thus, emotional empathy conveyed through joint pictures palliates bellicose public thinking, creating a potential political opening for presidents to pursue de-escalation once the summit is over. Put another way, intrepid presidents can photographically convince Americans to “give an adversary a chance.”

## Evidence from Singapore: Trump Meets Kim Jong-un

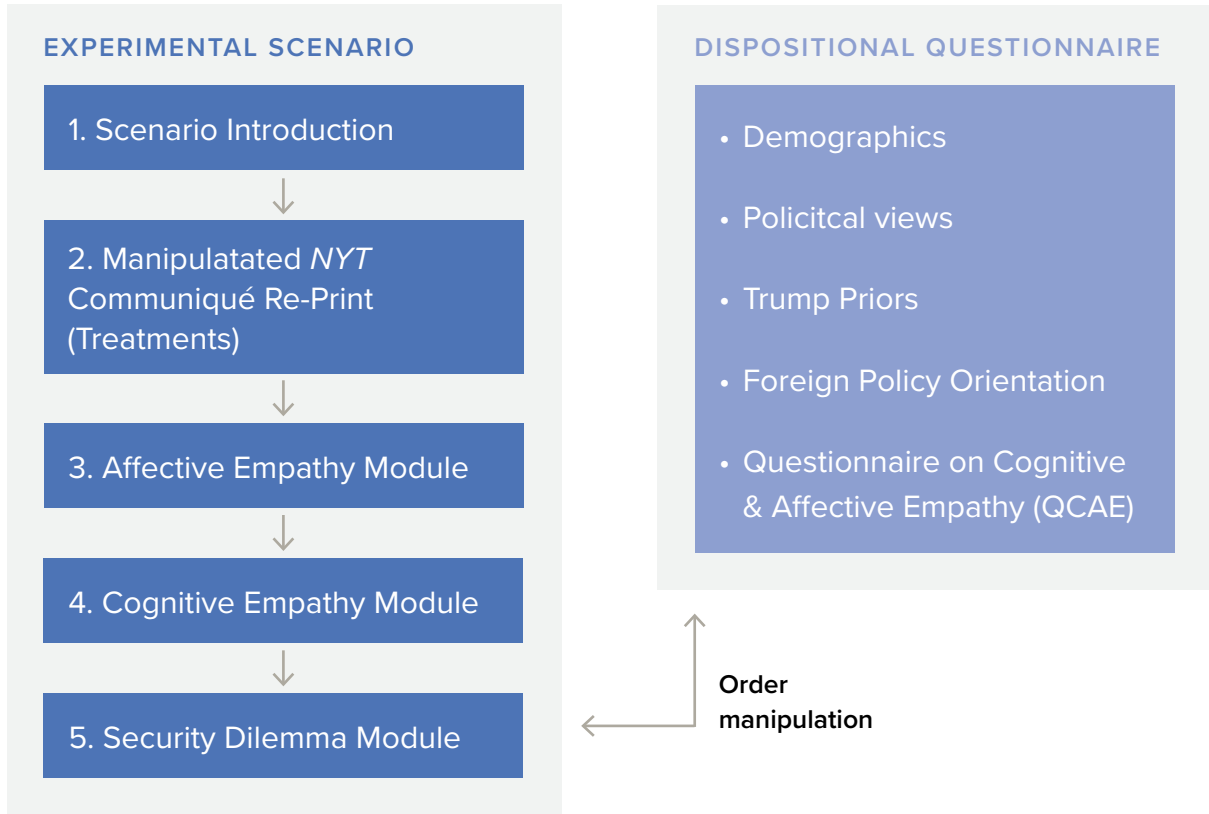
To better understand the value of summits with autocratic leaders to democratic leaders I conducted a survey experiment focused on the American public's reaction to photos from the 2018 Singapore Summit. The experiment was conducted in late 2020, by which time tensions between North Korea and the United States were much reduced from 2018, when President Trump had famously threatened North Korea with “fire and fury.”<sup>11</sup>

The Singapore Summit made an ideal test case because it was the epitome of a “photo op” summit with an adversary. It lasted only one day, did not affect President Trump's approval rating, and did not result in any concrete policy change.<sup>12</sup> The president, before the summit, intentionally set low expectations for a substantive breakthrough.<sup>13</sup> Yet the president participated in many elaborate pre-planned joint photo sessions with Kim Jong-un while attending the summit, and it was widely hailed as a historic first-time meeting between an American president and a foreign autocrat.

In order to maintain a controlled and realistic experiment, I attached photographs from the Singapore Summit to the top of a real *New York Times* reprint of the summit communiqué.<sup>14</sup> To maintain consistency, the treatment photograph and control photograph were derived from the same photograph. The control photograph simply had Donald Trump cropped out of the treatment photograph from Singapore.

I then collected data on a series of other variables and bellicose thinking. In an affective empathy module, I included emotional measures of hope, fear, and trust. In a cognitive empathy module,<sup>15</sup> I included three measures, one for cognitive activation and two for strategic adjustment.<sup>16</sup> Controls were included secondarily for partisanship, general foreign policy orientation, feelings towards President Trump, and emotional empathetic capacity, in addition to a demographic battery. Finally, a security dilemma module measured bellicose thinking about North Korea using multiple questions about policy preferences and attribution. The study design is visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Singapore Summit Study Design



The results showed that viewing President Trump jointly posing with Kim Jong-un had a significant effect on the way members of the U.S. public thought about American policy towards North Korea. Respondents who viewed President Trump with Kim Jong-un in a joint photograph had a 77 percent equivalent chance of displaying one of the following: (1) reduced fear, (2) increased hope, or (3) increased trust.

Moreover, more positive emotions translated into less aggressive policy preferences and greater strategic understanding. After seeing the joint photographs—and controlling

for a person's general foreign policy orientation—the equivalent of 51 percent of respondents exhibited one of the following: (1) less escalatory policy preferences, (2) more aggressive attributions for U.S. military actions, or (3) less negative attributions for North Korean nuclear weapons development.

These results provide convincing evidence that joint photographs can alleviate some belligerent thinking among members of the public when a threat is front-of-mind.

## Implications

Given presumptive future competition with autocratic adversaries such as North Korea, Iran, Russia, and China, studying the potential for summits to help alleviate public pressure for conflict is a valuable endeavor. The evidence above suggests that, even if summits produce no policy changes, the very fact that they occur and are documented may be important in palliating public preferences for aggressive behavior. Thus, diplomatic summits with adversaries can have intrinsic value in shifting public opinion, and can give an American president an opening to pursue de-escalation.

The evidence also highlights a potential dark side to summits: Even if no negative policy changes result from a summit, what if a foreign adversary's intentions are perceived to be hostile in photographs by the American public? If a president can visually convey positive emotions, he should theoretically also be capable of conveying negative ones. This could induce fear, smother hope, reduce strategic empathy, and lead members of the American public to pressure the government for new aggressive measures vis-à-vis an adversary. Kennedy and Khrushchev unintentionally demonstrated this potential negative outcome at Vienna.<sup>17</sup> It follows, therefore, that joint photographs must be carefully staged and managed lest tensions be exacerbated.<sup>18</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 For a more detailed look into the political pressures driving Johnson to escalate the Vietnam War see Elizabeth N. Saunders, "War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 466–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070618>;

For more on Kennedy's decision to escalate the arms race see Christopher A. Preble, "Who Ever Believed in the 'Missile Gap?'" John F. Kennedy and the Politics of National Security," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2003): 801–26. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0360-4918.2003.00085.x>.

- 2 See Douglas C. Foyle, *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 40–42.
- 3 Recall Trump's "fire and fury" threat. See Dan Merica, Jeff Zeleny, and Kevin Liptak, "Trump's 'fire and Fury' Remark Was Improvised but Familiar," *CNN*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/09/politics/trump-fire-fury-improvise-north-korea/index.html>.
- 4 For more on the communiqué see Robert E. Kelly, "Enough Photo-Op Summits: Is There a Deal with North Korea or Not?" *The National Interest*, July 8, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/enough-photo-op-summits-there-deal-north-korea-or-not-66001>.
- 5 President Trump's approval rating was 41 percent both before and after the summit. See Charlie Cook, "Why President Trump's Numbers Barely Move" *National Journal*, May 18, 2018, [www.nationaljournal.com/s/668131/why-president-trumps-numbers-barely-move?mref=search-result](http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/668131/why-president-trumps-numbers-barely-move?mref=search-result).

- 6 For an apt summary of the current literature on images and their importance see Leonard Mlodinow, “How We Are Judged by Our Appearance,” *Psychology Today*, June 11, 2012, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/subliminal/201206/how-we-are-judged-our-appearance>.
- 7 See Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 56–61.
- 8 See Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi, “Spinning the Globe? U.S. Public Diplomacy and Foreign Public Opinion,” *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (July 1, 2009): 864, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609090768>.
- 9 For more on public diplomacy activities that come with a visit by an American president see Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence*, 1st Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 10 For more on how autocrats manipulate public perceptions in their own countries see Laura Cardona, “Modes of Censorship in the World’s Five Most Censored Countries,” *International Review* (2017): 37–45.
- 11 See Dan Merica, Jeff Zeleny, and Kevin Liptak, “Trump’s ‘fire and Fury’ Remark Was Improvised but Familiar.”
- 12 For more on the non-effects of the first Trump-Kim summit see Jeffrey Lewis, “The Photo-Op Summit,” *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/10/the-photo-op-summit/> and Robert E. Kelly, “The Second Trump-Kim Summit: Getting Beyond the Photo Op,” *War on the Rocks*, February 5, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/the-second-trump-kim-summit-getting-beyond-the-photo-op/>.
- 13 See Donald J. Trump, “President Trump Remarks on North Korea Summit,” *C-SPAN*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.cspan.org/video/?446418-1/president-trump-announces-north-korea-summit-place>.
- 14 One critique has been that the detection of an effect is, in itself, evidence that the 2018 summit had no effect. However, the recency of priming typically affects effect size in most psychological experiments. Thus, an effect being detected is not indicative of the absence of an effect from the 2018 summit coverage.
- 15 “Cognitive empathy” and “strategic empathy” were effectively interchangeable concepts in this context.
- 16 “Adjustment” refers to anchoring and adjustment bias, a concept drawn from scholarly work in psychology. See Nicholas Epley and Eugene M. Caruso, “Perspective Taking: Misstepping Into Others’ Shoes,” in Keith D. Markman, William M. P. Klein, and Julie A. Suhr, *The Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation* (New York: Psychology Press, 2008). Strategic adjustment can be simply conceived of as the ability to adjust one’s beliefs accurately from some starting point.
- 17 See Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “The Personal Touch: Leaders’ Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, No. 3 (December 2008), 572, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2012.00731.x>.
- 18 For a recent example of this, see the broad reaction of the European Press to ‘Sofagate.’ See, for instance, “EU And Turkey’s ‘Sofagate’ Blame Game Enters Round 2,” *DW*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-and-turkeys-sofagate-blame-game-enters-round-2/a-57136061>.



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## Authors

**MAX PLITHIDES** is a Marvin Hoffenberg Research Fellow at the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles. He holds an MA in political science with a concentration in international relations from UCLA.

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