

## Review 2

**Title:** Face-to-face diplomacy social neuroscience and international relations. By Marcus Holmes (2018). 314 p. Cambridge University Press. ISBN-10: 1108417078

**Reviewed by:** Marie Blanche de Posch (University of Antwerp, Belgium)

In his book, Marcus Holmes defends the value of face-to-face interactions in diplomacy. This goes against most international relations theorists who have marginalized the study of diplomacy because of the intentions problem, and the fact that most sources are personal reflections from insiders rather than studies that can be generalized. Holmes claims that face-to-face interactions facilitate intention understanding. To prove the importance of face-to-face interactions in international politics, the author uses a recent neuroscientific idea that the brain has a mirror system that intuitively simulates the intentions of others in face-to-face interactions, and therefore greatly facilitates intentions understanding between the parties.

This stance is innovative for many reasons. First of all, the author wishes to be part of a “diplomacy renaissance”, a movement among scholars to study diplomacy while it has mostly been disregarded by international relations. His contribution is also scientifically relevant because of its multidisciplinary nature, it combines the fields of neuroscience, political psychology, international relations, and history in to revisit our vision of past and current diplomacy. The author seeks to provide theoretical and generalizable support for claims on the value of face-to-face diplomacy.

It seems that today most leaders also believe in the benefits of face-to-face diplomacy. The recent meeting between Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong-Un illustrates the importance of interpersonal contact in international politics.

All in all, Marcus Holmes provides an interesting book on an important topic that is easy to read. He acknowledges the limitations of his theory and extensively discusses pre-existing literature and counterarguments. The book is also interesting from the historical perspective, although the author sometimes seems to get lost in biographical details that are not relevant to the research question, which can make the reader lose track. Another weakness of this work is that it only concentrates on past interactions although diplomacy, international politics and communication have greatly evolved in recent years. Including more recent cases could make his claims more relevant.

Following Holmes' research question of “Do face-to-face interactions facilitate all seven chapters of the book. The book starts with presenting the puzzle of face-to-face

diplomacy, and then develops the theory in the second chapter. Chapters three to six illustrate the importance of face-to-face interactions with real-world historical examples. Those were selected because they were their diversity and the controversy around these cases in world politics. It is argued that these negotiations started with a low likelihood of success but eventually managed to reach an agreement thanks to face-to-face interactions. The first case discusses the changing relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev in the 1980s. Then chapter four analyses the relations between the same Soviet leader and President Bush. The following chapter looks at the mediation of American President Jimmy Carter in the David Camp peace process in the conflict between Israel's Begin and Egypt's El Sadat. The last case, developed in chapter six, analyses the detection of deceptive intentions using the controversial case of the Munich talks between Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler concerning the Sudetenland.

In the first chapter, the Yalta conference, a typical case against face-to-face diplomacy is briefly discussed. According to Holmes, the 1945-Yalta conference, in which leaders of the United Kingdom, the US and the Soviet Union met to discuss the fate of Germany and the post-war world order, was not per se a diplomatic failure. However, the subsequent Soviet interventions in the 40s and the 50s were. He contradicts the assumption that Churchill and Roosevelt were too naïve and misread Stalin. Holmes believes that the two Western leaders were right in believing in face-to-face diplomacy to understand intentions and transform relationships.

Holmes then states counterarguments to his view. The value of face-to-face diplomacy is often questioned because leaders can lie and deceive, which IR theory conceptualizes as the problem of intentions. The mutual will to reach an agreement occurs before diplomatic meetings and they are therefore useless in shaping international politics outcome. However, many leaders think differently and see face-to-face meetings as a cornerstone of world politics.

In the second chapter, we delve into the theory of intention understanding. IR theories state that since other people's minds cannot be accessed, intentions can only be interpreted, and uncertainty makes face-to-face diplomacy a dangerous endeavor. However, studies on empathy have investigated the mirroring system, as part of the "social brain" and have found reasons to doubt this assumption. According to this finding, intentions can be understood by simulating the intentions of others in our own brain during face-to-face interaction. Through the mirror systems in their brain, people should be able to experience what the other experiences and constitutes a pre-reflective image of their intention or simply said an intuition. The author also touches upon the weakness of the theories used. Indeed, face-to-face diplomacy is not always successful. The success of intentions understanding depends greatly on empathy. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence will, therefore, be able to better interpret nonverbal cues which is not the case for narcissists, or psychopathic personalities. Other factors such as familiarity, gender, social groups, social norms, and the strength of pre-existent beliefs could also play a role.

The third chapter analyses our first case, Soviet-US relations, and diplomacy between their leaders through the eighties. A radical change took place in the relationship between the USSR and the United States, between 1983 when Reagan described the Soviet Union as an evil empire against the background of nuclear war threat, and 1988 when they became productive partners and signed an agreement to ban nuclear weapons.

When Reagan came into office, the behavior of the US towards the Soviet Union was aggressive and due to the high turnover in Soviet leadership at the time, little to no contact occurred between the two countries. The turning point was the Able Archer NATO exercise program by the US which simulated an escalation in the tensions with the USSR culminating with a fictive attack. This was badly received by the USSR that readied their arms and nuclear arsenal. This marks the moment when Reagan realized that interpersonal encounters were necessary to calm the situation. After a long exchange of letters, Gorbachev was ready to do so and the leaders met at the historic Geneva Summit, which was followed by important encounters in Reykjavik, Washington and Moscow. The bilateral talks resulted in an agreement between the two parties and the signature of the INF treaty.

Holmes emphasizes that both Reagan and Gorbachev agreed on the importance of face-to-face interaction and on its impact on the humanization and improvement of the relations between the two states as a result. The author concludes from this historical overview of interpersonal encounters between the US President and the Soviet leader that face-to-face diplomacy was essential in overcoming the security dilemma and mistrust.

The next chapter looks at the so-called intentional Bush pause in the relations between the US and the USSR in 1989 when Bush believed that using other indicators would be more efficient at assessing Soviet intentions than interpersonal encounters with Gorbachev. After the fall of the Berlin wall, structural conditions changed, and Bush and the Soviet leader engaged in a series of face-to-face encounters to decide of the fate of Germany. Through these Bush was able to understand Gorbachev's intentions and pushed for a unified Germany in NATO. This case demonstrates that face-to-face diplomacy explains in large part the timing and outcome of the reunification of Germany. Without the face-to-face discussion between Bush and Gorbachev in Malta followed by a face-to-face meeting with Helmut Kohl, the outcome could not have been the same.

Chapter 5 "Overcoming distrust at Camp David" tackles a case in which conditions of face-to-face diplomacy and intentions understanding were difficult, which makes it interesting to test Holmes' claim. The focus is on face-to-face diplomacy during intractable conflicts, characterized by their prolonged nature, hatred, mistrust, and lack of empathy towards opponents. The case chosen here is the relationship between Israel and Egypt prior to and during the Camp David Accords in 1978-1979, mediated by Jimmy Carter, President of the US. Although this case is sometimes seen as an example of a failure of face-to-face interaction between Menachem Begin Prime Minister of Israel and Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt, this chapter argues the interactions that failed were concentrated on historical distrust and hateful interactions rather than on specific intentions. Since these were unfruitful, Carter decided to mediate the situation by having face-to-face meetings with both parties individually'. Throughout these interactions, both sides came to understand the other actors' intentions, and this radically altered the dynamics of the conflict. Face-to-face diplomacy therefore also drastically shaped the outcome of the negotiations. Aided by a mediator, the two parties managed to find a compromise despite the intractable nature of the conflict.

Chapter 6 discusses the Munich agreements between Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler concerning the Sudetenland, which is often used as an example undermining face-to-face diplomacy. Although the Munich conference led to dramatic events, Chamberlain

managed to gain some intuitions from his meeting with Hitler. He learned that Hitler was willing to settle the Czech Crisis at any cost, even by force if need be. He also got a sense of the ruthless nature of Hitler, of which he became slightly distrustful. These intuitions ended up being set aside on the next day as Chamberlain's narcissistic personality felt the need to publicly justify his encounter with the German Führer using exaggerated speech. Chamberlain held onto what he wished to believe and what would make him look good rather than trusting his intuitions. This example also shows the importance of the prior held beliefs as the British Prime Minister maintained his peaceful and trustful attitude towards Hitler, instead of paying attention to the cues that he had received during their meeting.

In his conclusion, the author goes back to the puzzle of face-to-face diplomacy. He the role of mediating effects. Those include prior held beliefs and personality characteristics such as narcissism. Moreover, the problem of intentions is undermined by the mirroring system and specific intentions, which suffice to grasp the intentions of the other. The security dilemma is therefore less problematic than IR theories make it seem. Furthermore, Holmes elaborates on the link between intention understanding and trust. According to him, intuitions and beliefs can help to build trust and face-to-face diplomacy and interactions enable emotional bonding and humanization of the other, a fertile ground for trust development. More research on these interlinked subjects is encouraged. The author finishes with a note on combining the fields of psychology and International Relations, as was attempted here. He discusses recent movements in social sciences to open the "black box" of causality in order to examine individual components of complex situations. He encourages such endeavors and calls for more research synchronization between the fields.