

1 The Puzzle of Face-to-Face Diplomacy

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men may read strange matters.
– Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 5)

The Puzzle and Argument

The journey was one of the most secretive in American history.¹ On January 20, 1945, ten days before his sixty-third birthday, the president of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, took the oath of office for the fourth time. His health was poor. His eldest son, James, remarked to his father shortly before taking the podium, in a vote of confidence, that he looked like hell. Despite this, a few days later Roosevelt embarked on a long voyage that would involve armored trains, a dangerous wartime Atlantic ship crossing, a circuitous airplane voyage, and finally, a Soviet limousine. At his destination, Yalta, Roosevelt would, together with Winston Churchill, negotiate the postwar world order with Joseph Stalin. Like many leaders before them, both Roosevelt and Churchill were believers in personal diplomacy, proponents of traveling to meet with friends and adversaries face-to-face in order to establish relations, build understanding, reassure one another, hash out deals, and ultimately find cooperative solutions to political problems.² This trip, however, would ultimately leave Roosevelt disappointed. As the politics unfolded over the coming months and years, “Yalta” became an infamous symbol, rivaled perhaps only by “Munich,” for the perils of personal diplomacy and the naiveté of taking the words of other leaders at face value.

This, at least, has been the received wisdom. In recent years the tripartite negotiations at Yalta have been reanalyzed through the lens of the ending of the Cold War and the opening of the archives. An examination

¹ See Ploky 2010, 3–35 for an excellent and thorough rendition of the history of this trip. I return to the Yalta summit in more detail in the concluding chapter of the book.

² Larres 2002; Reynolds 2009; Ploky 2010.

2 The Puzzle of Face-to-Face Diplomacy

of newly available evidence suggests that the notion that Yalta was a diplomatic failure is based more on subsequent disappointment with Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the Cold War, specifically the 1940s and 1950s, than what happened at the summit itself.³ The eventual political outcome has overshadowed both the poor negotiating position of the West as well as what Roosevelt and Churchill got right in their reading of Stalin. The Western leaders knew that Soviet cooperation would be required for peaceful postwar organization, but the most that they could offer was providing Stalin with autonomy in dealing with his territorial acquisitions and allowing Stalin to keep German war booty. In exchange, Roosevelt was able to secure a commitment for his two most significant aims: for the Soviet Union to fight in the war with Japan and to join the fledgling United Nations Organization. Stalin kept both promises. Further, on the specific intention regarding Poland, a main source of future dismay, little was actually settled at Yalta. Disagreements over Poland were not resolvable in a week-long mid-war conference, nor was this the intention. Indeed the Soviets had no clear discernible intentions regarding Eastern Europe at the time. In other words, specific intentions regarding Poland were not present at Yalta and they were therefore not communicated in the face-to-face diplomacy that Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin engaged in.

Thus one of the greatest and persistent myths from the Cold War, which has been codified in powerful analogy that is used to evoke the dangers of face-to-face personal diplomacy, that Stalin lied to a naive and all-too-trusting Churchill and Roosevelt and thereby started the Cold War, is problematized by the record. This is not to suggest that Western leaders could not have engendered more from their negotiations with Stalin at Yalta. They likely could have. But what is often lost in the symbol and analogy of Yalta as a failure of face-to-face diplomacy is how much both sides were able to communicate and read from each other *and* how the persistent myths that are told about these interactions may be misleading. While Roosevelt was ultimately disappointed that he could not reassure Stalin, the evidence suggests that he did ultimately read him, in large part, correctly. The story of Yalta should be focused as much on what Roosevelt and Churchill got right in their reading of Stalin's intentions, as what would happen subsequently during the Cold War.

I argue in this book that leaders like Roosevelt and Churchill are right in their belief that face-to-face diplomacy aids intention understanding and can often result in the transformation of relationships, whether it be in conveying peaceful intent to adversaries or reassuring nervous allies.

³ See, for example, Plokhy's 2010 account.

While they may not be able to articulate precisely what it is, whether a “sense” or a “gut instinct” or an “intuition,” practitioners of international politics who privilege the interpersonal are on to something. This stands in stark contrast to much of received international relations (IR) theory. Many scholars of IR take cases such as Yalta to highlight the futility, at best, and danger, at worst, of personal diplomacy. Diplomacy of the type practiced in Yalta, the *face-to-face meeting*, has long been the lynchpin of international politics. Yet, as analysts such as Sol Sanders have often argued, “personal diplomacy, whether practiced by Franklin D. Roosevelt with the cool disdain of a Hudson River patrolman or Henry Kissinger with his accent ‘mit schlag,’ has largely led to disaster.”⁴ Indeed this interpretation of Yalta as something of a disaster for the West fits this narrative nicely and contributes to a healthy amount of skepticism in IR regarding diplomacy’s place. This pessimism has different sources.

First, many argue that diplomacy generally, and face-to-face diplomacy specifically, is cheap talk. Costless communication that is expected to reveal preferences often fails to do so because diplomats and leaders have incentives to deceive during crisis bargaining.⁵ Since leaders can lie, there is often little reason to trust what they say, particularly in personal encounters where there is less of an audience to worry about. This gets at the heart of what many IR scholars refer to as the “problem of intentions,” and is responsible for creating potential conflict, in relation to the security dilemma.⁶ Since we cannot read the minds of other people in order to ascertain or divine their intentions, individuals are always susceptible to misperception and deception.⁷ And, as IR theorists point out, in the worst cases this can lead to catastrophe.⁸ Roosevelt and Churchill allegedly read Stalin’s intentions regarding Poland incorrectly, in the received narrative of the summit, foreshadowing the Cold War. Similarly, Neville Chamberlain famously read Adolf Hitler incorrectly in the run-up to the Munich agreement. These high-profile failures, where

⁴ Sanders 2008. ⁵ Fearon 1994.

⁶ I view the security dilemma as the problem of intentions, though there is divergence of opinion on this issue in the literature. See Booth and Wheeler 2008 for a systematic analysis of the links between the problem of intentions and the security dilemma and Tang 2009 for a conceptual review of the security dilemma.

⁷ The problem of intentions has both synchronic and diachronic dimensions, since intentions are always subject to change in the future due to simply changing minds, changing leadership, or other reasons (see Mearsheimer 2001; Copeland 2006). This book is primarily concerned with the synchronic dimension of the problem, though for reasons to be discussed in the following chapter face-to-face diplomacy also helps to undercut some forms of the diachronic dimension as well.

⁸ Though it does not have to, necessarily, as I discuss in the next chapter. See Rosato 2015 for a pessimistic take.

4 The Puzzle of Face-to-Face Diplomacy

the costs of getting the intentions wrong were extremely high, loom large, and cloud, for many, the very prospect of face-to-face diplomacy serving any beneficial purpose in world politics. Put simply, since the stakes are so high, face-to-face interactions, without anything costly to back them up, cannot be trusted.⁹

Second, traditional structural considerations, such as power and economic disparities, are believed to account for most of the variation in international politics outcomes. From this perspective diplomats and leaders are essentially “along for the ride,” willing participants in a game that they have little control over. They may believe that they make a difference, and report in their memoirs and diaries that they were central to important outcomes during their time in power, but at the end of the day their activities are epiphenomenal to more important and powerful processes at work. Even those who think that diplomacy might make a difference often concede that it is what occurs *before* diplomacy takes place that is the relevant part of the process. This line of argument suggests that a necessary condition for having diplomacy, in other words, is the strong prospect for agreement.¹⁰ You do not get personal meetings without all sides believing that agreement is likely (or perhaps as a last resort after everything else has failed), and therefore the personal meeting is less important than what happened before it. This leads to a selection bias problem that bedevils many studies of diplomacy: since instances of diplomacy exist because agreement was likely, the study of diplomacy is biased toward viewing diplomacy as successful. In other words, it is difficult to address “the dogs that don’t bark,” the instances where diplomacy does not happen because it would never have a chance of succeeding. These critiques of diplomacy are important reasons to think that personal diplomacy, as practiced by diplomats and leaders for centuries, is largely secondary to more powerful material processes.

On the other hand, minimizing diplomacy as secondary or irrelevant puts scholars in the uncomfortable position of having to argue that a

⁹ See the large literature on “costly signaling,” e.g. Fearon 1994. It should be noted that the “costs” that scholars typically have in mind when it comes to costly signaling is of the domestic audience variety, where leaders will theoretically have to pay for not living up to a commitment, not necessarily a personal variety. While FDR and Churchill undoubtedly paid significant costs in making the annoying and dangerous travel to Yalta, particularly in FDR’s case because of his health, this is not a type of cost that necessarily would communicate truthfulness since it is the costs of *backing down* from the agreement that really matter. Though see Snyder and Borghard 2011 for more skeptical views of the traditional “audience cost” perspective from a variety of empirical perspectives.

¹⁰ This notion is similar to William Zartman’s (1986) insight that some conflicts might be “ripe” for agreement and settlement. For more on this line of argument and responses to it, see Ramsay 2011; Rathbun 2014.

prevalent variable of political practice does not much matter when leaders tell us that it often matters a great deal. Ronald Reagan, on realizing that the Soviets harbored beliefs about US intentions that were inaccurate, desperately sought a face-to-face meeting with Soviet leadership in order to clarify intentions and “get beyond the stereotypes.”¹¹ Jimmy Carter believed that if he could just get Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin in the same room together, they would see each other as equals and cooperate on important matters in the Middle East. This is not merely a twentieth century invention. Rather, the personal face-to-face meeting has been a cornerstone of world politics at least since the fourteenth century, with institutionalized face-to-face meetings dominating since the Congress of Vienna, with some arguing the origins go back far longer, perhaps to antiquity.¹²

This creates an important puzzle. Is face-to-face diplomacy actually important, as many leaders believe and, if so, what is it specifically that sometimes results in mutual understanding and in other cases creates misperception or even the perpetration of deception? If diplomacy is helpful to cooperation and developing understanding, why is it perceived by many non-diplomats and non-leaders as unimportant or irrelevant? Or is this simply a case of decision-makers displaying naiveté or overconfidence in their ability to persuade and read others? Further still, could the positive cases of personal diplomacy be explained by leaders overemphasizing their influence for posterity? After all, it is easy to highlight the virtues of face-to-face once one is out of office and “the results are in.” It is harder to make such determinations when the stakes of failure are high. Outcomes in international politics often depend on the personal meeting, and the success or failure of diplomacy often hinges on what occurs in those meetings and the decisions that are made based on the information exchanged in those encounters. A theory of face-to-face diplomacy must be able to explain not only *why* leaders engage in this type of diplomacy but also the *outcomes* that obtain from such interactions.

I argue that face-to-face diplomacy is important to world politics because it is a *sui generis* form of communication. Face-to-face interaction represents a unique signaling mechanism that allows leaders to escape the problem of intentions, and thus the security dilemma, by communicating their intentions to each other with a very high degree of specificity. Put simply, face-to-face interaction is an unrivaled mechanism for intention understanding. Drawing from recent insights in social

¹¹ Massie 2013, 174.

¹² Fennemore 2003, 114 and Mitzen 2013 on the Concert, Bederman 2001 on Antiquity.

6 The Puzzle of Face-to-Face Diplomacy

psychology, philosophy of mind, and especially social neuroscience, I argue that face-to-face meetings allow individuals to actively *simulate* the *specific* intentions of others. We know the intentions of others by automatically simulating what we would be thinking and intending if we were in the position of the other. This type of intention understanding is quick, intuitional, and, it turns out, supported by discrete architecture and mechanisms in the brain that are devoted to parsing others' intentions via cues that exist only in face-to-face interaction. This brain architecture, referred to broadly as the *mirroring system*, enables advanced neural synchronization between individuals, which in turn enables actors to directly access the intentions of others with a higher degree of certainty than economic or game-theoretic models of bargaining predict. Put simply, in face-to-face interaction the mirroring system increases, all else being equal, the prospects for intention understanding and deception detection.

The mirroring system is highly nuanced. It is able to pick up on micro-changes in facial expressions and realize subtle shifts in the emotional states of others, which conveys their level of sincerity. This means they are applicable to a wide range of diplomacy settings. In certain instances leaders wish to convey their sincere intentions as clearly as possible. During the Cold War it was a series of personal face-to-face meetings between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan that helped to reassure each other of their benign intentions. Both sides sought to signal to the other, in the clearest way possible, their sincere intentions to cooperate. The face-to-face diplomacy between the two allowed both sides to read the sincerity of the other.

In other cases leaders do not wish to convey their intentions, preferring instead to keep their plans close to the vest. At the end of the Cold War, Gorbachev found himself again negotiating with US and European leadership over the fate of Germany, in particular on the question of whether Germany would remain divided or be reunified. Gorbachev, in negotiations with President George H.W. Bush, sought a solution to the Germany problem that would be favorable to Soviet interests and therefore sought to not let his reluctant intentions for a unified Germany be known to the American delegation. Yet the face-to-face meetings, particularly those that occurred during the Malta Summit, belied that strategy. Bush and others read from Gorbachev that he could be pushed on German unification, which was a correct understanding of Gorbachev's intentions, a reading that was likely only possible because of the face-to-face meetings that occurred.

Under certain conditions face-to-face interactions may also allow individuals to overcome long-standing intractable conflicts where distrust

is abundant. At the beginning of the Camp David Summit in 1978, Jimmy Carter quickly realized that lack of trust and personal animosity between Menachem Begin and Anwar El Sadat, leaders of Israel and Egypt respectively, meant that the two could not stand to be in the same room with each other after the first two days of the summit. Yet, less than two weeks later the two signed monumental accords, which brought a lasting peace between the two states. Crucially, while there was an overt lack of trust between the protagonists, in particular between Sadat and Begin but also between Carter and Begin, Carter was able to use face-to-face interactions in such a way that the sincere intentions of both were conveyed to each other.

The mirroring system has also been shown to play a role in detecting deceptive intentions. The human brain comes equipped with resources to help individuals detect when they are being lied to, a skill that improves greatly in face-to-face interactions because of the wealth, and richness, of information being transmitted. In one of the most infamous cases of deception in the twentieth century, Neville Chamberlain traveled to Germany to meet with Adolf Hitler in an attempt to negotiate a settlement that would avert war on the continent. Hitler told Chamberlain that his aims were modest and he could be trusted to keep his word; Chamberlain bought it, telling his Cabinet back home that he felt Hitler could be trusted. Ultimately this deception contributed to the timing, if not the onset, of World War II. This case is taken to be an example *par excellence* of the futility of personal diplomacy precisely for all the reasons mentioned above, namely the problem of intentions and inherent cheap talk quality of diplomacy. Yet, a careful reading of Chamberlain's experience in Germany suggests a much more nuanced reading of the case. There is evidence to suggest that while Chamberlain did not ultimately conclude that Hitler was being deceptive he did get the impression that something was amiss. More specifically, he identified the very precise characteristics that are often present in people who are being deceptive. Therefore, even in the hardest case for the utility of diplomacy, deception, there is value that comes from the face-to-face interaction.

Ultimately this argument problematizes the notion that intentions are fundamentally unknowable in international politics, a common and important assumption made in international relations theory, and provides a way out of the security dilemma at the interpersonal level by providing a new mechanism for *intention understanding*. More broadly the book contributes a new understanding of the latent uncertainty problem in international politics. Rather than individuals operating under uncertainty, face-to-face interactions allow them to be much more certain in their assessments of the other. This suggests that uncertainty as

8 The Puzzle of Face-to-Face Diplomacy

the default position under anarchy needs to be re-examined. Under certain conditions, it can be escaped.

Importantly, leaders and diplomats often intuitively understand precisely what I argue in this book. They often *insist* on meeting face-to-face, arguing that this arrangement allows them to achieve outcomes they would not be able to achieve otherwise. As Vincent Pouliot has persuasively argued, they have a “feel for the game.”¹³ They know what to do and when to do it, even if they cannot pinpoint precisely why or how face-to-face works. How did interacting face-to-face become part of the feel for the game? What do diplomats and leaders often understand at an intuitive level that IR scholars have not yet appreciated? Most importantly, what is the mechanism by which face-to-face interactions sometimes result in mutual understanding and other times in continued misperception? Historians, like leaders, have also extolled the virtues of leaders and diplomats meeting personally with one another to resolve conflict. Yet, IR has been slow to appreciate these claims, arguably because there is, as of yet, no theory of face-to-face diplomacy that is generalizable beyond particular cases.¹⁴ This book attempts to answer these questions and provide theoretical and generalizable support for claims regarding the value of face-to-face diplomacy, made by historians and leaders alike.

The Renaissance of Diplomacy Studies: Diplomacy as Agency and Structure

In so doing this book contributes to something of a renaissance in diplomacy studies. Despite serving a central role in world politics, the study

¹³ Pouliot 2010, 35–36. See also Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014.

¹⁴ One of the closest to doing so among historians is Frank Costigliola (2012, 98), who notes the importance of personal politics, including interpersonal interactions, in shaping the beginning of the Cold War. In particular he highlights the importance placed by Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin in using face-to-face encounters to “reveal inner thoughts and ultimate intentions.” He does not, however, theorize the extent to which this belief is validated or create a generalizable theory that can be applied to other individuals and cases. Other IR scholars have noted the importance of face-to-face interaction in diplomatic history, without theorizing its importance in a systematic way. Martha Finnemore (2003, 114–115) notes, for example, that the “face-to-face personal [meeting] as a means of interstate diplomacy emerges from largely unintended and unexpected experiences at [The Concern of] Vienna,” with negotiators and leaders such as Castlereagh alike extolling the virtues of sitting down together. Finally, Booth and Wheeler (2008) have come the farthest in an IR context to theorize the “human factor of international politics, while stopping short of a full-fledged theory of face-to-face interaction (though see Wheeler 2018 for follow-up work on the links between face-to-face interaction and trust-building, which I discuss in detail in the concluding chapter of the book).

of diplomacy has historically been relatively marginalized in the discipline of IR, particularly in the American context, limiting what we know about both what diplomacy is and how it works.¹⁵ Diplomacy has been variously defined, though most accounts include some notion of “communication between states,” and “peaceful conflict resolution through negotiation when interests diverge or do not wholly overlap.”¹⁶ The marginalization of these processes has several sources. One is the systemic and structural focus of the discipline since the Cold War.¹⁷ Another relates to the aforementioned problems of sending/receiving costly signals and deception. Perhaps even more importantly, accounts of diplomacy in the literature have traditionally often been comprised of personal reflections and anecdotes, sometimes bordering on autobiography, with statesmen or diplomats describing the virtues of diplomacy while paying little attention to the other important forces mentioned above, or downplaying the times when it did not work out.¹⁸ This work, while interesting and important, comes from a “very hands-on” vantage point, one that makes it difficult to both generalize across different types of cases, and to evaluate diplomacy’s effects relative to other causes of outcomes. That is to say, diplomacy “has been particularly resistant to theory.”¹⁹

This has begun to change recently, however, with a turn toward theorization of diplomacy from diverse perspectives, a renaissance to which I seek to contribute.²⁰ Two broad approaches in particular have emerged: diplomacy as agency and diplomacy as structure. While in some cases these approaches may overlap, the contours are distinct and highlight the ways in which diplomacy as an object of inquiry has evolved over the last

¹⁵ I am far from the first to argue that diplomacy has been relatively marginalized in IR, particularly American IR, and therefore remains poorly understood. For recent work conceptualizing diplomacy and explaining this marginalization, see Neumann 2005; Neumann 2008; Neumann 2012; Adler-Nissen 2014; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014; Rathbun 2014; Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015. On the other hand, not everyone agrees that what is occurring in diplomacy studied now constitutes a renaissance or revival, since, “strictly speaking . . . [r]ather than a *revival* of interest in diplomacy . . . it is perhaps more accurate to refer to an *expansion* of interest” (Constantinou, Kerr, and Sharp 2016, 8) as there was never a great deal of diplomacy study in IR, at least that which would resemble what is being studied in diplomacy studies today. Though, as I elaborate below, diplomacy has long been at the heart of the English School theory of IR.

¹⁶ Rathbun 2014, 11. ¹⁷ Holmes and Bjola 2015.

¹⁸ Sharp 2009, 1–2; Der Derian 1987, 91; Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015. Nicolson 1939 is a prominent example of this type of work.

¹⁹ Der Derian 1987, 91.

²⁰ Trager 2017 provides an excellent overview of the recent diplomacy literature, delineating two traditions which he terms “diplomatic communication” and “rhetorical-argumentative.” My delineation of diplomacy as agency and diplomacy as structure shares many commonalities with this approach.

10 The Puzzle of Face-to-Face Diplomacy

several decades. Agentic approaches tend to highlight the causal effects of individuals in diplomatic social interactions, such as negotiations. The emphasis tends to be on the ways in which decision-makers, typically leaders and statesmen, but also diplomats and ambassadors, communicate, and process information they are able to gather in diplomatic encounters in order to make political decisions and achieve outcomes. Diplomacy is agentic because, as Rathbun argues, individual actors “go about achieving [their interests] in very different ways.”²¹ Negotiation style, form of communication, and the individual characteristics of those taking part in diplomacy each have causal effects, suggesting that diplomacy and diplomatic outcomes are not endogenous to attributes of the material environment, such as the distribution of power.²² Rather, actors possess significant ability to intentionally engage in goal-directed action that is not determined solely by structure.²³ This set of approaches has greatly contributed to our understanding of the force of leaders and statesmen in acting against structural constraints.

Another perspective highlights diplomacy’s constitutive effects on international politics. This approach agrees that diplomacy cannot be reduced to structural or systemic forces, but rather “produces effects of its own” as a *socially* emergent phenomenon.²⁴ Put another way, diplomacy is a social structure, which in turn has effects. The structure in mind here is not the distribution of power or material resources, but rather the practices of diplomats and other representatives. The English School, for instance, viewed diplomacy as one of the key social institutions of the “international society” of states.²⁵ More recently the *practice* of diplomacy has come into focus as an area of inquiry, recognizing the power of individuals, groups, and movements to structure international politics.²⁶ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann, for example, argue that the practices of diplomats constitute world politics, “making and remaking” the international in a number of ways through social processes. As such, diplomacy is a social and historical institution that provides a communication channel, reduces transaction costs, and provides a permanent infrastructure that often stretches beyond state boundaries. It also institutionalizes hierarchies.²⁷ For example, in his recent book on

²¹ Rathbun 2014, *x*.

²² On negotiation style see Rathbun 2014. On forms of communication, see Yarhi-Milo 2014. See also Rathbun 2014; Yarhi-Milo 2016 on individual-level characteristics.

²³ Agency is a “thick” concept in that it is multifaceted and multidimensional; see Mitzen 2013, 3–4 for a discussion of the use of agency in IR.

²⁴ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015, 17. ²⁵ Bull 1977.

²⁶ Neumann 2003; Constantinou 2006; Sharp 2009; see also Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015.

²⁷ Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015.