

Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump seem now set to meet, as planned, on the 12th of June on the island of Singapore. Many of us have watched with bewilderment the verbal jousting that has been taking place between the two figures ahead of this crucial summit. Each political leader, as well as surrounding Korean and American protagonists, provided their due share of grand statements and dramatic turnarounds.

For those studying interactions under uncertainty, there was plenty. To us, something has been particularly intriguing in this high-powered exchange: Why would the American president keep stressing how uncertain his plans were, if the goal was to secure a collaboration with his North Korean counterpart? Why, in other words, would anyone advertise their indecision to the very person they try to convince to cooperate?

Donald wanted Kim to meet with him, and vice-versa. Both Donald and Kim were unsure that the other would commit to the meeting. In order to secure a stronger commitment from Kim, the straightforward strategy would have been to signal the strength of one's commitment (by making a promise, for instance, or showing consistency in one's statements). Was it possible for Donald to secure a stronger commitment from Kim by diverging from the straightforward path and instead signalling that the option to [cancel the meeting altogether](#) is fully open?

We are using the case of Trump just as an illustration. We are not concerned with his mindset, or asking whether his actions were impulsive or strategic. The point is: Is there any signalling function in expressing that one is ready to walk out of a decision to cooperate? What is the potential benefit in signalling that one is unreliable or lacks commitment?

The same Donald Trump, with a businessman hat, has said that it is a good idea to keep ["a lot of balls in the air" because over time, "most deals fall out"](#). Committing too early without fully exploring the available deals may leave you wanting. But, again, explicitly advertising your indecision to the very people you are trying to convince to cooperate with seems strange if not downright incompetent. The problem is not in *being* partially committed to a collaborative option and *privately* keep other options open, but in choosing to let the interested party *know* about our undecidedness.

How could broadcasting one's lack of commitment toward one's preferred option not end up pushing the adversary away? What is the benefit of mentioning that options are open? Here are some possible scenarios:

1. **Implicit demand to raise commitment:** by making it clear that you have other options beside collaborating, you let the other know that your commitments are conditionals. This choice might be risky, as you also signal that you are not fully committed, but it may be something worth using to invite an upgrading of commitment from the other side. They need to persuade you to maintain or honour your commitment. Showing that you keep options open is actually a useful bargaining tool to challenge the other to put more commitment in the interaction. Most research has looked into how collaborators express their own commitment to each other. Here, the speech act is different: An openly reluctant collaborator encourages or demands the other to increase their commitment.
2. **Reciprocal lowering of defection threats:** When the stakes are high, you may want to let others know that you have not ruled out the costly option of breaking the cooperation. Throughout the Cold War and to this day, many governments have invested masses of their taxpayers' assets in nuclear weapons and arsenals that - almost everyone agrees (and hopes) - they have no intention to use. This costly investment has been framed by Cold War theorists such as [Thomas Schelling](#) as a deterring signal that one 'is prepared for all sorts of options'. To keep the power intact, the possibility needs to be there. This strategy ends up in the

opposite camps investing in keeping the threat of defection (and retaliation) open. The signal needs to be honest, and the possibility of walking out of the cooperation needs to be constantly entertained. Deterrence is an indirect signal indicating that that one is also keen to maintain the cooperation. The difference here is between a threat which may provoke escalation, and signalling that a costly option of breaking cooperation remains open, but is not necessarily the preferred one (“Even though I may cooperate, be aware that I keep the option of retaliating if you defect”). Deterrence in this way could be understood as a strategic reminder that both camps are only conditionally committed to a cooperation. The readiness to reciprocate in defection and the ensuing costly punishment, therefore, secures cooperation.

3. **Signalling dominance through control over decisions.** There are other cases where indecision indicates a refusal to let go of conspicuously less advantageous options. We argue that far from being an incompetently irrational strategy, this is a strong statement signalling to others that undecided one remains *in control*. By vacillating between cancelling or confirming the 12th June summit with North Korea, Donald Trump was telling the world, and his Korean counterpart, who is the boss.

Interestingly, staying undecided by keeping options open could act as **self-signalling too**. A recent study showed that having more options to choose from increases our perceived degree of agency. The study was particularly careful to demonstrate this even when our choice does not impact the quality of the outcomes. [Kulaova and colleagues \(2017\)](#) had their participants repeatedly gamble for a small monetary reward. In every trial, the participant would either choose one of two possible gambles or was instructed which gamble to choose. The gambles were then played out and the outcome was revealed. Participant’s sense of agency was measured by direct self-report as well as through an implicit measure called [Intentional Binding](#). Importantly, the two gambling options had identical expected value meaning that instructed or free choice had no impact on the outcome and amount of earnings. Both measures indicated a higher sense of agency and control when participants chose which gamble to play vs when they were instructed, i.e. when one option was eliminated for them.

This finding tells us that having more options increases our sense of agency. More control, in turn, gives us a feeling of autonomy which gives us resilience in the face of uncertainty and stress. This idea is key to understanding why small business owners work for longer hours for less pay yet often (paradoxically, perhaps) claim to have a better work-life balance than when they worked for others. Facing the glory of open options and self-signalling through making the decisions yourself may be at the root of this hard-earned satisfaction. Perhaps letting others know that we are ready to walk out of a worthy collaboration makes us feel, but also display to be, most in control by showing to others that we are can choose to do even what is not necessarily the best for us.