



The Personal Touch: Leaders' Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs¹

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What counts as evidence that the other side is sincere? Within mainstream international relations literature, scholars have focused on costly signals. We argue, however, that in the real world leaders do not simply look at costly signals, but they rely to an important extent on their personal impressions of other leaders, taking these as credible indicators of sincerity. Our approach thus builds both upon the literature on interstate communication and perceptions and upon more recent research in the field of neuroscience regarding affective information. To probe the plausibility of our theory, we focus on the indicators British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain used to evaluate Germany sincerity in the late 1930s and Ronald Reagan employed to make sincerity judgments about Soviet intentions in the late 1980s. Additionally, we briefly discuss the 1961 Vienna Summit between Kennedy and Khrushchev as an illustration of how personal impressions can also result in negative assessments of sincerity. Our findings suggest that personal impressions are an important, but up until now relatively ignored, source of evidence for leaders of their counterparts' sincerity with significant implications for threat assessments and policy choices.

I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy...I was able to get a sense of his soul...

—George W. Bush, Press Conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin, June 16, 2001

This is the president that looked in the soul of Putin, and I could have told him, he was a KGB agent...Yes, you might have good relationships, but most leaders are not going to make decisions based on their personal relationships.

—Hillary Clinton, January 7, 2008 (“Ex-KGB Spy Putin Has No Soul, 2008”)

How do leaders evaluate whether or not their counterparts are sincere? The problem is that under many circumstances state actors have the incentive to misrepresent their actual intentions for strategic advantage. The question of how to separate the sincere from the bluffing is one that has long occupied scholars of international relations. The rationalist answer agrees with Hillary Clinton: leaders should not look to their personal impressions when judging the sincerity of their opposite numbers.

We contend, however, that Bush was far from alone among world leaders in drawing upon personal impressions to judge the sincerity of his counterparts. Indeed, notable figures such as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman were arguably influenced by their personal impressions of Stalin (Groth 1964; Larson 1988). Churchill even at one point stated, “Poor Neville Chamberlain believed he could trust Hitler. He was wrong. But I don’t think that I am wrong about Stalin” (Yergin 1977:65). Truman similarly stated that Stalin “could be depended upon...I got the impression Stalin would stand by his agreements” (Larson 1988:246). While historical accounts and case studies within IR frequently note the impressions leaders have of one another, there is little theoretical support within the field for taking such factors seriously.

In this paper, we argue that leaders can and do treat personal impressions garnered from interactions with their counterparts as credible indicators of sincerity. We are agnostic as to the actual value of personal impressions as reliable evidence of sincerity. What is important is that leaders perceive their impressions as such and make decisions accordingly.

Our dependent variable of interest consequently is sincerity judgments—subjective estimates about the likelihood that a state will behave in a manner consistent with its leaders’ statements and promises. Sincer-

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ity judgments are not the same as assessments that others are “decent people”; a leader could be viewed as sincere when stating intentions regarding anything ranging from reconciliation to genocide. The issue at stake is whether or not leaders believe their opposites can be taken at their word regarding how their state will behave.² Sincerity judgments are important because they can shape choices in strategic interactions. If state actors believe their opposite numbers are offering sincere statements or promises, their own decisions and behavior will reflect this.

Certainly, in not all cases do leaders’ sincerity judgments play an equally significant role. But we argue that certain institutional, situational, and personal variables can make leaders’ sincerity judgments an important factor in areas ranging from threat assessments to rapprochement. In particular, we highlight institutional arrangements which give leaders an important, final role in arbitrating between policy choices and situational conditions such as crises that circumvent normal policymaking processes.

Our arguments challenge rationalist approaches that would dismiss impressions gained from personal interactions as inconsequential noise. To be sure, we are not claiming that traditional rationalist instruments—such as costly signals—do not matter. Rather, we propose that empirically, such signals are not the exclusive basis for leadership judgments of sincerity. Indeed, as our cases make clear, on issues of high politics and in the midst of crises, personal impressions played as significant a role as—and arguably even a greater role than—costly signals in shaping key decisions.

In proceeding, we first review standard approaches to the problem of sincerity in international relations. Second, we offer our own framework integrating the work of Jervis on non-manipulable indices such as personal behavior with newer findings in cognitive neuroscience. Third, we evaluate our approach in comparison with the costly signals arguments by looking at two cases: Chamberlain’s estimates of Hitler and Reagan’s interpretations of Gorbachev. We conclude by offering the 1961 Vienna meeting of Kennedy and Khrushchev as an example of how interpersonal interactions can also have negative effects on the sincerity judgments leaders form of their counterparts.

The Problem of Sincerity and the Rationalist Solution

While there do exist scholars who claim that intentions are unknowable and thus only capabilities matter (Mearsheimer 2001), for many in the field of IR, the role of intentions carries key significance. Such a stance can be found across diverse work on threat perception (Walt 1987:25–26), deterrence (Schelling 1966:35), and the outbreak of war (Fearon 1995). As Thomas Schelling (1966:35) observed, “the hardest part is communicating our own intentions.” Since we cannot get inside the heads of others to know what they think, we are forced to rely on their observable state-

ments and behavior. The difficulty is that actors have the incentive to bluff. For example, leaders may make empty threats with the hope of scaring concessions out of an adversary. Conversely, leaders may profess benign intentions to lure their target into a false sense of security. In either case, leaders can gain from misrepresenting their intentions.

What is therefore needed is a means to cull the sincere from the insincere. Within the rationalist literature, a general consensus has coalesced around the importance of costly signals for fulfilling this function (Fearon 1997; Kydd 1997; Morrow 1999). The logic is that insincere types will be disposed to feign sincerity for as long as it is cheap; only those that are actually sincere will put their money (or military forces, or political future, etc.) where their mouth is. For some within the rationalist tradition, this argument about costly signals is a prescriptive one: Actors should evaluate signals in this manner in order to make correct assessments (Glaser 2010). For others, however, this argument is an empirical one: Leaders do evaluate signals according to the criteria of cost.

The majority of work on costly signals in this latter vein has looked at crisis situations, where leaders are faced with the task of proving their resolve. But the implications of the costly signals argument extend to all areas where actors would have the incentive to bluff. Thus, work that has focused on the role of trust and reassurance in international relations has also placed a strong emphasis on the significance of costly signals. Deborah Larson, for example, in her largely psychological account of trust, still gives costly signals an important role. She states, “Policymakers are more likely to infer that another state’s concession is a sincere sign of a desire to improve relations if the concession is relatively costly” (Larson 2000:27). Kydd’s (2005) rationalist account of the end of the Cold War focuses on costly signals as the means to reassure suspicious adversaries. For Kydd, costly signals function in a Bayesian fashion to alter the expectations actors have that their counterparts are willing to reciprocate cooperation (Kydd 2005:187).

In short, whether talking about signaling intentions, type, resolve, or trust, the issue at stake in the signaling literature boils down to whether or not the actors in question are sincere. In a world where there is reason not to trust actors at their word, we must look to other sources for evidence of their sincerity. For rationalist approaches, that evidence comes in the form of costly signals. Accordingly, such approaches tell us that when signals have no associated cost, they provide us no measure of sincerity. We contend that while this may be defensible as a prescription for leadership behavior, it does not reflect how leaders actually behave.

Personal Interactions as Evidence of Sincerity

Robert Jervis similarly notes that the costless signals actors intentionally send include no information about whether their sender is being honest or deceptive. While Jervis ([1970] 1989:26) identifies costly signals as one indicator of sincerity, he also highlights the impor-

² This is akin to what Jervis has termed a “signaling reputation”—an “actor’s reputation for living up to its word”—as differentiated from general reputations about an actor’s type. See Jervis (2002:305).

tance of indicators which actors perceive as immune to manipulation. The logic is simple: Irrespective of their cost, observers will view those indicators of sincerity which are “beyond the ability of an actor to control” as difficult or impossible to use to project a false image and therefore reliable.

In a perfect world, honesty and deception would be perfectly discernable in the form of non-manipulable signals. Imagine, for instance, a world in which leaders who lied would turn bright green. Under such conditions, personal interaction would provide all the information needed to assess the sincerity. Our reality is far from that simple, and yet this fantasy scenario is not entirely irrelevant to the argument at hand.

Interpersonal interaction provides a setting in which leaders not only exchange information by the content of what they say, but also through myriad other channels. These include facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, even unconscious movements or reactions. As Jervis ([1970] 1989:32–33) states, “When an actor is able to directly observe one of his adversaries he will...scrutinize those presumably uncontrolled aspects of personal behavior that are indices to the adversary’s goals, estimate of the situation, and resolve.” Frank (1988:96–145) has claimed that emotional predispositions—evidenced through cues in expression, voice, and posture, for instance—do indeed provide a source of information about intentions. Frank argues that because these behaviors are not fully under our control, they help us to distinguish cooperators from defectors. The fact that tell-tale signs of our emotions can “betray us” may have been naturally selected to solve social commitment problems. Cosmides and Tooby (2002) have further argued that the brain has specialized neurocognitive mechanisms for cheater detection.

While we do not turn green depending on our intentions, there do exist subtler signs. Jervis ([1970] 1989:34), for instance, highlights the way in which negotiators may probe which issues are important to their counterparts by looking for a “flushing of the face” and signs in their “neck muscles.” The psychologist Ekman (2003) has argued that even when people seek to suppress their emotional responses, they still display “microexpressions”—emotion-specific contractions of facial musculature that can last for less than a fifth of a second. He claims that attention to such emotional “leakage” can improve our estimates of whether or not others are lying (Ekman 2003:15).

Although the dependability of expressive cues as actual barometers of sincerity may be subject to debate, research within fields such as cognitive neuroscience increasingly suggests that human beings are acutely attuned to such evidence. Apart from the conscious ways leaders might seek to explicitly “read” the behavior of their opposites, there is also a strong argument for the ways we always and already are automatically formulating such readings on an affective level. These are processes that can occur below the level of conscious reflection, and yet produce feelings that shape our judgments.

Consider simply the reactions we have to other human faces (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2008). We

form impressions of others on an affective-level fractions of second after being exposed to their faces (Bar, Neta, and Linz 2006). Importantly, the composition of these virtually instantaneous reactions correlate highly with whether or not the individual is subsequently perceived as trustworthy (Frank 1988; Adolphs 2002; Winston, Strange, O’Doherty, and Dolan 2002; Phelps 2006; Todorov and Engell 2008). What is more, our brains are especially sensitive to displays of emotion (Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, and Damasio 1996; Breiter, Etcoff, Whalen, Kennedy, Rauch, Buckner, Strauss, Hyman, and Rosen 1996; Blakemore and Frith 2004). Seeing another human being expressing an emotion such as fear, for instance, can result in increased activity within brain areas linked to emotional response (Breiter et al. 1996). Recent research on the phenomenon of mirror neurons—whereby neurons “mirror” observed behavior as if they were involved in performing it themselves—suggests the brain simulates for itself the movements and expressions of others (Gallese, Keysers, and Rizzolatti 2004; Keysers and Perrett 2004; Dapretto, Davies, Pfeifer, Scott, Sigman, Bookheimer, and Iacoboni 2005). Such internal simulation allows individuals to vicariously “feel into” the expressed emotional states of their interlocutors (Frank 1988; Blakemore and Frith 2004; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkiel, Krauth-Gruber, and Ricman 2005; Gallese, Eagle, and Migone 2007). But emotional responses are not limited to facial expressions; they also include changes in voice or posture, for example, as well. These factors all contribute to the affective-level impressions actors form of their interlocutors.

These impressions are not static, though; during the process of interaction, we continuously and unconsciously update the affective impressions we have of others (Gobbini, Leibenluft, Santiago, and Haxby 2004; Singer, Kiebel, Winston, Dolan, and Frith 2004; King-Casas, Tomlin, Anen, Camerer, Quart, and Read Montague 2005; Petrovic, Kalisch, Pessiglione, Singer, and Dolan 2008; Schiller, Freeman, Mitchell, Uleman, and Phelps 2009). Negative experiences, for instance, can generate negative feelings that influence the affective impressions we have toward those linked to such experiences (Petrovic et al. 2008). This effect is most starkly demonstrated by patients suffering anterograde amnesia—and consequently unable to form explicit memories about recent events. They still retain affectively based judgments about others as “good guys” or “bad guys” despite having no memory of why (Johnson, Kim, and Risse 1985).

All this is to say personal encounters can serve to produce impressions based upon the appearance, expression, behavior, and tone of our interlocutor that are not simply retained as explicit assessments, but also as affective evaluations. Such impressions form the intuitive basis for both negative judgments about others (like “having a bad feeling about X” or “X seems like they are hiding something”) and positive judgments (“X is a good person” or “something feels right about X”). These feelings are not objective facts; nevertheless, they do form a type of subjectively experienced information.

The Link to Leaders

Recent findings in neuroscience thus push us to conceptualize personal impressions not simply as explicit judgments, but also as involving less conscious, affective-level components. So while actors may intentionally look for signs in the demeanor of their counterparts—such as emotional “leakage”—in order to make explicit sincerity judgments, they also automatically generate affective responses, even during the briefest of encounters. Leaders, as human beings, are also subject to these dynamics. As Groth (1964:833) writes, “frequently, the information obtained by the policymaker through personal contact may not be strictly ‘hard facts’ but rather overall impressions, such as a feeling of an image. The policymaker may leave a conference with a conviction, not easily reducible to concrete evidence, that the other side is strong or weak, resolute or vacillating, sincere or disingenuous.”

Our interest in personal impressions among leaders builds on work that has shown the variation in the beliefs and characteristics of leaders to have an important impact on outcomes of interest to international relations scholars (Byman and Pollack 2001; Hagan 2001; McDermott 2004b:215–238). We recognize that structural and domestic factors also greatly shape state behavior; nevertheless, the influence of these factors in many cases is arguably indeterminate (Byman and Pollack 2001:113–114; Hagan 2001:6–10; McDermott 2004b:215–238). When situational and institutional variables leave leaders as the final arbiter, selecting between options under considerable uncertainty, what leaders believe about their foreign counterparts can play a crucial role in subsequent outcomes (Byman and Pollack 2001:139–143).³

An important question in this research tradition concerns which variables can shape leader beliefs. Within political science more generally, there has been growing interest in the role of affect as information (McDermott 2004a; Mercer 2005, 2010). This work proposes that our felt responses shape the certainty of our beliefs, willingness to take risks, and preferences for certain choices, and dovetails with earlier work on the significance of information salience (Nisbett and Ross 1980:59–61, 123–127; Kaufmann 1994:563). As Borgida and Nisbett (1977:269) classically argued, “there may be a kind of ‘eyewitness’ principle of the weighing of evidence, such that firsthand, sense-impression data is assigned greater validity....” Or in the words of Kaufmann (1994:563), “information that is highly salient (vivid, concrete, immediate, emotionally interesting or exciting) will receive greater weight than its evidentiary value warrants....People pay more attention to, and are more influenced by, especially salient information than less vivid information.”

The affective nature of personal impressions, the fact that they are both personal and personally felt, arguably qualifies these as a form of highly salient information. Personal impressions are therefore a type of information with properties different, for example, from detached, analytical, or impersonal forms of information such as diplomatic reports or intelligence

briefings. In fact, leaders may even have inordinate confidence in their impressions of others, strengthened as Jervis ([1970] 1989:33) notes, “by their belief that their rise to power was partly dependent on a keen ability to judge others.”

In introducing personal impressions as a form of particularly vivid and salient information, we are engaging debates in the field of international relations about both leadership belief formation and sincerity judgments. Rationalists have focused on how information about the sincerity of others can vary in terms of its costliness. In contrast, we are building upon work within the field that information can also vary in terms of its personal and affective salience.

Evaluating Personal Impressions as Information about Sincerity

The primary hypothesis that emerges from the above is that leaders can and do draw upon their personal impressions when making sincerity judgments. Our dependent variable is therefore sincerity judgments—the subjective estimates leaders form about the likelihood that a state will subsequently behave in manner consistent with the statements and promises of its leaders. To evaluate our primary hypothesis, we need to look at the empirical record of how leaders have sought to assess whether their opposite numbers were telling the truth or not. The absolute null hypothesis is that leaders do not base their judgments on anything related to their personal impressions—or even dismiss their own personal impressions—and instead compare the claims of other leaders with costly behavioral indicators, domestic political evidence, intelligence estimates, and expert analyses. Indeed, from a purely rationalist perspective, we should not expect impressions generated within “cheap talk” situations to be given any credence.

In hypothesizing personal impressions as a form of evidence policymakers employ when making sincerity judgments, we seek to advance the field of foreign policy decision making. Bluntly, should personal impressions play an important role in sincerity judgments, ignoring this factor would lead to false assessments of how and why policymakers select certain courses of action. We believe that international relations scholarship should seek to comprehend how policymakers actually decide and behave in the real world, and such research is necessary as the foundation for both accurate analysis and practical policy suggestions.

That said, we acknowledge it is extraordinarily difficult to forecast exactly what impressions leaders will take away from meetings with their counterparts; personal impressions by nature are contingent on highly personal and contextual factors containing large degrees of variance and are hard to independently assess. Consequently, we are forced to begin our analysis with how personal impressions, once formed, serve as evidence of sincerity and bracket the question of what shapes impressions.

Still, because personal impressions are closely linked to the influence of personal factors on international politics, it is possible to draw upon this latter literature

³ We address these variables in more detail below.

(Greenstein 1967; Byman and Pollack 2001; Winter 2003) to propose conditions under which personal impressions would play the greatest role. First, all else equal, leaders institutionally endowed with power to make independent judgment calls will have more discretionary freedom to draw upon their own personal impressions. Conversely, should leaders perceive their counterparts to be under strong institutional constraints and thus relatively powerless, personal impressions may be given less weight. Second, specific situational factors can also play a role. Situations where information is scarce, ambiguous, or contradictory can push leaders to rely on personal impressions for the lack of other sources. Also, leaders may fall back on instinctual personal impressions in situations when they experience reduced cognitive processing capacity, such as due to crisis-induced stress (McDermott 2004b:173–176). Finally, attributes characteristic to certain leaders may also be influential. Leaders highly confident in their personal judgment and distrusting or dismissive of bureaucratically produced assessments will more likely draw upon personal impressions. Alternatively, actors with strong preconceptions or prejudices may be more gradual in adjusting their evaluations in response to personal interactions.

An ideal world would provide accessible, easily quantifiable indicators of the personal impressions leaders take away from interactions with their counterparts, offering us sufficient data to assess the above hypothesis across a large number of cases. To our knowledge, however, no such indicators exist. Re-creating the subjective beliefs of leaders requires engaging in intensive, fine-grained analysis of historical sources. Unfortunately, the time and resource requirements of such an approach place strong constraints on the ability of the scholar to pursue large-N analysis.

Accordingly, our strategy is to begin with plausibility probes, which are useful when research requires a significant investment (Eckstein 1975:108–113; George and Bennett 2005:75). As George and Bennett (2005:75) state, plausibility probes “are preliminary studies on relatively untested theories and hypotheses to determine whether more intensive and laborious testing is warranted.” For our probes, we chose to examine British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s evaluations of German sincerity regarding the Munich Agreement and US President Ronald Reagan’s assessments of Soviet sincerity in its efforts at reconciliation. We chose these cases according to a combination of criteria. First, the leaders involved had personally met—a basic condition for our theory—and for both, a reasonable degree of historical data on leadership beliefs and deliberations was available for establishing the value of our independent variable.⁴ Second, the cases needed to match the plausibility probe standard

that “the theory could hardly be expected to hold widely if it did not fit closely there” (Eckstein 1975:112–113). In line with the tentative propositions offered above, such cases were those where (i) leaders had a significant institutional role in determining policy; (ii) they faced either a crisis or an ambiguous situation; and (iii) they had confidence in their leadership ability. These cases provided such conditions. Third, they were neither easy nor obscure cases. Competing theoretical explanations already existed for both and the leaders involved were structurally predisposed to suspicion about the sincerity of their counterparts. Specifically, both cases concerned great power adversaries, who by virtue of divergent interests and the high stakes of power competition were structurally inclined to be mutually wary.

We subjected each case to two probes: (i) a covariance test to examine the fit between the independent variables cited by the costly signaling thesis, our own approach, and other possible competing theories on the one hand and the dependent variable of sincerity judgments on the other, especially as the variables changed over the course of interactions; and (ii) an examination of whether leaders explicitly cited personal impressions as opposed to other sources as evidence of sincerity. This latter component is important as an observable implication of our theory, providing a further check against mistaking correlation for causation. For empirical sources, we relied on primary declassified documents, secondary literature, and the record of these leaders’ public statements.

We find that in both cases leaders believed their counterparts to be sincere on the basis of their personal impressions. Our argument, however, postulates that personal impressions can also contribute to beliefs in the insincerity of others. We thus additionally provide a brief discussion exploring this dynamic, intended for illustrative purposes, of the 1961 Vienna Summit between US President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

“Herr Hitler Was Speaking the Truth:” Chamberlain’s Assessments of Hitler’s Sincerity and the Crisis over Czechoslovakia

In September 1938, Chamberlain was hailed in Britain as the man who had brought peace to Europe. The British public perceived the Munich Agreement as a success for Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. At the agreement’s core was the belief that Germany’s revisionist behavior (at least in Europe) would end with the annexation of Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland. But why, and to what extent, did British decision makers believe German claims that its aims were limited? Specifically, did Chamberlain see Hitler’s assurances to this effect as credible? And, if so, what explains Chamberlain’s inclination to believe such “cheap talk”? Indeed, the fact that Chamberlain staked his own reputation and some may argue, the future of Europe, by accepting Hitler’s assurances as sincere is especially puzzling in light of the repeated costly German actions that suggested Germany, and more particularly Hitler, could not be trusted.

⁴ Being limited to accessible data may produce a selection bias, but there is little reason to think this would *covary* with the role of personal impressions. Furthermore, absence of mention of personal impressions in the empirical record—even when they were operative as an unspoken, affective influence—should actually bias the evidence in the opposite direction of our arguments.

We argue that a close reading of Chamberlain's reasoning lends an overwhelming support to the personal interaction thesis, and only weak support for the costly signals thesis. Despite past actions that signaled untrustworthiness, and notwithstanding previous and repeated German statements indicating a grandiose expansionist scheme, Chamberlain trusted Hitler's word. In doing so, he relied almost exclusively upon his impressions from three private meetings with Hitler. To be clear, we do not claim that Chamberlain believed German intentions were benign. The evidence indicates that Chamberlain was aware Germany had limited revisionist intentions, and that Britain lacked the interest, will, and military preparedness to intervene. At the same time, however, Chamberlain formed strong impressions of Hitler's sincerity from their personal interactions, arguing before his own cabinet that Hitler "would not deliberately deceive a man whom he respected and with whom he had been in negotiations," adding "he was sure that Herr Hitler now felt some respect for him" (United Kingdom 1938d).

The Costly Signaling Thesis and Hitler's Sincerity

When Hitler became German Chancellor in 1933, he demanded equality of rights and a revision of the Treaty of Versailles, and withdrew from the Disarmament Conference and from the League of Nations. On March 7, 1936, despite Hitler's assurances that with the conclusion of the Saar issue, there was no longer any cause for conflict between France and Germany, German troops occupied the Rhineland. Two years later, Germany's use of coercive power to achieve the Anschluss with Austria, as well as the speed of Hitler's actions, took British decision makers by surprise. By that time, British decision makers had already anticipated that Germany's next probable target would be Czechoslovakia. British decision makers were also alarmed by Hitler's efforts to militarize German society and its youth, seeing this as aimed "to bring Germany to a point of preparation, a jumping off point from which she can reach solid ground before her adversaries can interfere" (United Kingdom 1933). Finally, the substantive measures Germany had taken to build a powerful military also indicated revisionist intentions. Indeed, from 1933 onward, British intelligence reported on German efforts to build up its air and land forces above limits set by the Versailles treaty. In 1936, continuing German efforts to build offensive armed forces led British intelligence and military officials to assess a looming threat of German military hegemony on the continent.

Consequently, prior to 1938, Germany had undertaken multiple costly actions that pointed to revisionist aims. These included its withdrawal from binding institutions, various military actions, investment in substantial offensive capabilities, and domestic policies aimed at the militarization of German society. Against this background, and in the midst of the Sudetenland crisis, British decision makers debated the credibility of Hitler's assurances. If the costly signaling thesis is correct, Hitler's domestic and international behavior

should have led Chamberlain and his colleagues to discount Hitler's assurances as deceptive cheap talk aimed at allowing Germany to acquire more territory on the cheap.

Chamberlain's Judgment of Hitler's Sincerity in the Sudeten Crisis

In the midst of the public negotiations between the Sudeten Germans and the Czechoslovakian government, it became clear to members of the British cabinet that failure to satisfy German demands would likely provoke German military occupation of the Sudetenland, if not the whole of Czechoslovakia. Dreading the possibility that Britain would be forced to intervene militarily, Chamberlain decided to implement his secret plan, known as Plan Z, and requested to meet with the Führer in private. Hitler accepted. The first meeting took place at Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden on September 14. Hitler demanded self-determination for the Sudeten Germans, but promised to refrain from hostilities until after Chamberlain had consulted with the British cabinet. Following that meeting, Chamberlain informed his cabinet of the results of the secret meeting. He then flew to Bad Godesberg on September 22, to learn that Hitler now wanted an immediate occupation of the Sudeten territories without a guarantee of frontiers until other minority claims were satisfied, and threatened a military invasion of the Sudetenland on September 28. Chamberlain was surprised by these additional demands, rejected them, and described the meeting as "most unsatisfactory." The next evening, the two leaders met again, but Chamberlain failed to convince Hitler to soften his demands. On September 23–24, Hitler reassured the parties involved that he was interested only in the Sudetenland, but still demanded the cession of the Sudetenland by October 1 and military occupation endorsed by a plebiscite before November 25, 1938. Shortly thereafter, Czechoslovakia rejected the terms Hitler set forth at Godesberg. Following Chamberlain's suggestion for a conference between Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Britain, and Germany, Hitler offered to postpone his move into Czechoslovakia for 24 hours. On September 28, Hitler invited Chamberlain, Mussolini, and Daladier to come to Munich. The four leaders agreed to the cession of the Sudetenland, Britain and France offered to guarantee Czechoslovakia's newly drawn boundaries against external aggression, and Chamberlain and Hitler signed a pledge for future consultation. With little choice, Czechoslovakia accepted the Munich agreement, and on October 1, 1938, German troops occupied the Sudetenland. Less than 6 months later, on March 15, 1939, German forces invaded and occupied Prague.

Reporting to the "inner cabinet" about his first meeting with Hitler on September 16, Chamberlain noted that he could not say with certainty whether Hitler had further territorial aims beyond the Sudetenland. Chamberlain did explain that Hitler might be prepared to repeat his assurances not to attack Prague if his demands concerning the Sudeten territories were met (United Kingdom 1938b). However, on Sep-

tember 17, Chamberlain argued before the entire cabinet that following his meeting with Hitler, he had “formed an opinion that Herr Hitler’s objectives were strictly limited” (United Kingdom 1938a). Furthermore, he was reassured by Hitler that the boundary with Poland was “definitely fixed”; that Hitler renounced any claim to Alsace-Lorraine; and that he had signed the Naval Agreement with Britain because he believed that there would be no war between the two countries. In addition, Chamberlain reported that Hitler was sincere when saying he only wanted the return the Sudeten Germans to the Reich and that he “did not wish to include Czechs in the Reich.” Once that goal was accomplished, Chamberlain relayed, Hitler claimed he would be satisfied. Overall, the protocol of that cabinet meeting concludes,

The Prime Minister said that the impression left on him was that Herr Hitler meant what he said. He thought also that this conversation was consistent with what Herr Hitler had said at other times. It was clearly of the utmost importance to make up one’s mind whether the inclusion of the Sudeten Germans in the Reich was the end at which Herr Hitler was aiming or only a beginning. This was a matter on which one could only exercise one’s judgment. The Prime Minister’s view was that Herr Hitler was telling the truth. (United Kingdom 1938a).

In a private letter to his sister Ida, dated September 19, 1938, Chamberlain confirms these inferences, making it clear that at this crucial moment in history, he relied primarily on his impressions to reach a decision about Hitler’s sincerity:

In short, I had established a certain confidence which was my aim and on my side and in spite of the hardness & ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word. (Self 2005:348)

Following Chamberlain’s second meeting with Hitler, he was asked by a member of the inner cabinet about Hitler’s intentions beyond Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain answered that he “was satisfied that Herr Hitler was speaking the truth when he said that he regarded this [i.e., the Sudeten] question as a racial question. He was also satisfied that Herr Hitler regarded the terms offered as his last word, and that if they were rejected he would fight” (United Kingdom 1938b). Overall, Chamberlain reported he established “some degree of personal influence over Herr Hitler” and “was satisfied that Herr Hitler would not go back on his word once he had given it to him.”

Similarly, following his second meeting with Hitler, Chamberlain reiterated before the entire cabinet his assessment of Hitler’s intentions, noting:

...the crucial question was whether Herr Hitler was speaking the truth when he said that he regarded the Sudeten question as a racial question which must be satisfied and that the object of his policy was racial unity and not the domination of Europe. Much depends on the answer to this question. The Prime

Minister believed that Herr Hitler was speaking the truth. (United Kingdom 1938b)

Chamberlain appears to have been attuned to Hitler’s expressive signals—which he perceived as non-manipulated—as indicators of the Führer’s mood and mind. For example, in a letter to his other sister Hilda, Chamberlain notes, “Hitler’s appearance and manner when I saw him appeared to show that the storm signals were up, though he gave me the double hand shake that he reserved to specially friendly demonstrations. Yet, these appearances were deceptive. His opening sentences when we gathered round for our conference were so moderate and reasonable that I felt instant relief” (Self 2005:350). Similarly, in a letter to Ida, he writes, “I did not see any trace of insanity but occasionally he [Hitler] became very excited and poured out his indignation against the Czechs.” Chamberlain even felt that he had some influence over Hitler, noting, “Hitler was at my disposal” (Self 2005:347–348).

To be sure, some members of the British government were quite skeptical about Chamberlain’s inferences regarding the scope and nature of Hitler’s intentions, questioning Chamberlain’s assertion that Hitler’s recent assurances were more credible than the record of Hitler’s statements and actions pointing otherwise. For example, the First Lord of the Admiralty referred to a series of statements which Hitler had made “to the effect that he had no intentions of attacking Austria or Czechoslovakia” and therefore felt that his promises were “quite unreliable” (United Kingdom 1938a). The Secretary of State, the President of the Board of Trade, and the Lord President of the Council also voiced similar expressions of doubt (United Kingdom 1938a). Finally, the Lord Privy Seal explained that “after looking at Herr Hitler’s record and his intentions as set out in his writings, it was impossible to have any confidence in him. If what was now asked for was conceded, he would only ask for more later” (United Kingdom 1938c).

Especially puzzling from the perspective of costly signaling is Chamberlain’s lack of reference to Hitler’s past actions and statements during this crisis, and the extent to which these were discounted in favor of an impression-based analysis. Critics might argue that none of Hitler’s previous actions should have led British decision makers to conclude that his ambitions included the absorption of non-German territories. Therefore, Chamberlain was in no position to know that Hitler would intentionally and willingly risk a major war with Britain over additional territories in Europe. Even so, this does not contradict the argument we are making here either. While Germany’s costly signals prior to the Sudeten crisis did not necessarily provide evidence about the scope of Hitler’s revisionist intentions, they nonetheless should have led Chamberlain to doubt the sincerity of Hitler’s statements. They did not. Thus, the costly actions thesis appears to be inconsistent with Chamberlain’s decision to give credence to Hitler’s assurances as well as the reasoning he advocated to support his decision. In sum, we agree with Self (2005) that Chamberlain “misplaced confidence in his own judgment and the magi-

cal effect of the ‘the Chamberlain touch’ as a cause of his supposed credulity in dealing with the dictators long after any reasonable basis for trust had disappeared.”

An alternative argument is that Chamberlain was suffering from a motivated bias (Janis and Mann 1977:91–92; Jervis 1989:24–27) that wanting to avoid war he essentially saw what he wanted to see. The difficulty is that if Chamberlain were simply driven by a motivated bias, we should then expect him to have cited any and all confirming evidence, or even rigged further sources in his own favor (Lebow 1981:115). Chamberlain should have projected his desired views onto other indicators as well, such as interpretations of Hitler’s willingness to use force, German domestic constraints, German concerns about reputation, or the state of the German military. Yet the extent that Chamberlain chose to primarily link his assessments of Hitler’s sincerity to his personal impressions—to different audiences, both in writing and orally—indicates that he placed primary stock in his personal impressions as valid evidence. Furthermore, even if Chamberlain was in part unconsciously motivated by defensive avoidance, it still is quite surprising that most members of the British cabinet also accepted the evidence Chamberlain presented.

A second alternative is that argued by Ripsman and Levy (2008), that Chamberlain was not deceived, but rather “buying time.” While Chamberlain may indeed have known that Britain lacked the military strength to fight Germany at that point, he still had no incentive to misrepresent his impressions to the cabinet or his sisters. Why risk his reputation in proclaiming that Hitler would keep his word if he did not believe it? Chamberlain could equally have stated that Hitler was a liar, but argued the agreement would slow him down to Britain’s advantage. That he did not suggests that subsequent to meeting with Hitler he indeed believed in his impressions as evidence.

“Trust but Verify:” Reagan’s Assessments of Gorbachev’s Sincerity and the End of the Cold War

In May 1988, Ronald Reagan declared that the Cold War was over. In contrast to just a few years earlier, Reagan perceived a significant shift in Soviet foreign policy under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. International relations scholars have advanced different explanations for the change in Reagan’s views, most notable perhaps being costly Soviet actions of reassurance. All the same, even the strongest proponents of such arguments have smuggled into their accounts descriptions of the personal relations between Reagan and Gorbachev and the role these played in contributing to reducing tensions and ending the Cold War (Kydd 2005:325–57). From a strictly rationalist perspective, personal impressions should have been discounted as the product of cheap talk; accordingly, we should not expect Reagan to cite them as evidence indicating a genuine change in Soviet goals. Moreover, while some scholars have written about the chemistry between the two leaders, they have not explicitly theorized about the relative influence that these personal impressions, in comparison

with other types of evidence, had on Reagan’s assessments of the Soviet foreign policy goals during the mid-to-late 1980s.⁵ To be clear, we are not interested in addressing the counterfactual possibility the Cold War would have continued were not for the special partnership fostered between the two leaders. Rather, we ask two specific questions: first, did Reagan rely on his personal impressions of Gorbachev as evidence of the sincerity of the Soviet leader? And second, to what extent did these personal impressions reinforce, interact with, or overshadow the inferences Reagan drew from costly Soviet actions during the same time period?

The Costly Actions Thesis and Soviet Reassurance

A review of costly Soviet actions during this period independent of its effect on perceived intentions poses a challenge. Scholars who advance the claim that costly Soviet actions were responsible for changing American perceptions describe as costly those actions that appear to have contributed to changing beliefs, and label “not costly enough” those actions that did not have the desired effect on beliefs (Kydd 2005). The result risks bordering on tautology. For example, in 1985, the Soviets did indeed take actions that could have been interpreted as attempts at reconciliation. The US side, however, initially dismissed these as insincere and rationalized away their cost, at times even citing the fact the gestures were taken without prior consultation between leaders as grounds for suspicion. This points to the actual difficulty that confronts policymakers in determining the true cost of signals, particularly when they harbor deep suspicions. Nevertheless, for the sake of creating the strongest possible counterargument against our thesis, we only accept as costly those signals acknowledged by US leaders as such. In what follows, we therefore outline the concrete gestures the Soviet Union took in the security sphere and how they these were read by the United States as evidence of sincerity.

From the perspective of costly signaling, Gorbachev’s agreement to fully accept the American zero-zero proposal on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) signified the first Soviet action which important actors within the US government viewed as costly and binding. Despite the criticism from more conservative members of the administration, Reagan regarded the treaty as signaling an unprecedented Soviet readiness to accept extensive and intrusive monitoring arrangements. Soviet behavior during 1988 offered additional signs the United States perceived as costly reassurance, such as the initiation of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and Gorbachev’s efforts to restructure the political system in the Soviet Union. Particularly important was the introduction in January 1987 of competitive elections within the CPSU for party posts, followed by the announcement of additional reforms in June 1988, constituting comprehensive institutional

⁵ An important exception is Fred Greenstein’s work. Greenstein, however, is interested in the impact of Reagan’s and Gorbachev’s personalities; we are concerned with Reagan’s inferences about Gorbachev’s sincerity (Greenstein 1996).

and ideological changes paving the way for Soviet liberalization.

According to the costly action thesis, Reagan should have changed his beliefs about Gorbachev's sincerity in response to costly Soviet actions. Thus, we should not see a change in Reagan's perceptions before mid-1987, when the Soviets signed the INF Treaty—the first signal the US side accepted as genuinely costly. Second, the costly action thesis would expect Reagan's personal impressions of Gorbachev to have no significant affect on judgments regarding either Gorbachev's sincerity or Soviet intentions more generally, since these should have been seen by Reagan as cheap talk.

Personal Interactions and the Sources of Reagan's Changing Perceptions

Between 1985 and 1988, Reagan and Gorbachev held numerous private meetings during four different summits: the 1985 Geneva summit, the 1986 Reykjavik summit, the 1987 Washington summit (where the two sides signed the INF treaty), and finally, the 1988 Moscow summit. The personal interaction thesis suggests that Reagan's impressions from these interactions with Gorbachev could serve as information for Reagan about the sincerity of Gorbachev's efforts to reduce tensions between the two superpowers. Granted, positive personal impressions do not automatically erase deeply held prior beliefs overnight; the strength of Reagan's pre-existing beliefs about the revisionist nature of the Soviet Union and its expansionist intentions should lead us to expect that change, should it occur, would be a gradual process. If personal interaction did indeed have an effect, we should observe Reagan explicitly linking his change in perceptions of Gorbachev's sincerity to his personal impressions from these meetings.

Below we evaluate the theses against the available empirical evidence. First, we argue that during 1985 and 1986, Reagan's personal impressions of Gorbachev significantly influenced his estimation of Gorbachev's sincerity. In fact, following the first Geneva summit, we already see an important change in Reagan's tone and attitude toward Gorbachev. While arguably not representing a drastic reversal in Reagan's beliefs about Soviet foreign policy goals, this did play a visible role in Reagan's public statements about the possibility of a genuine change in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, these changes in Reagan's attitudes cannot be explained by the costly signaling thesis, since during that period the US side did not view the Soviet Union as having provided any costly evidence of benign intentions. Second, even after the official signing of the INF Treaty during the Washington summit—in other words, after the United States acknowledged costly signals had been provided—Reagan still continued to give significant weight to his personal impressions of Gorbachev when making claims about the leader's sincerity.

Pre-Costly Signaling Period: 1985–1986

Throughout 1985, Reagan voiced skepticism regarding Gorbachev's genuine desire and ability to change Uni-

ted States–Soviet relations (Reagan 1990:415, 614–615). In a memo to his national security adviser shortly before leaving for Geneva, Reagan commented that Gorbachev was “totally dedicated to traditional Soviet goals,” saying, “He is (as are all Soviet General Secretaries) dependent on the Soviet Communist hierarchy and out to prove to them his strength and dedication” (Matlock 2005:151–152). Following the Geneva summit, Reagan continued to believe the Soviet Union was not yet committed to improved relations with the United States. But there were real signs in Reagan's subsequent statements indicating that the American president was positively impressed with Gorbachev, and he expressed markedly more optimism about the possibility of a genuine change in Soviet policies under Gorbachev. Upon their first meeting, Reagan and Gorbachev “hit it off well.” In his memoir, Reagan confesses, “As we shook hands for the first time, I had to admit ... there was something likable about Gorbachev. There was warmth in his face and his style, not the coldness bordering on hatred I'd seen in most senior Soviet officials I'd met until then” (Reagan 1990:635). Further, Reagan admits that he “grew to like him more”; although he thought the Soviet premier was still convinced Communism was superior to capitalism, he felt he had “finally met a Soviet leader I could talk to.” What is more, he realized subsequently that “Not once during our private sessions at the plenary meeting did he [Gorbachev] express support for the old Marxist–Leninist goal of a one-world Communist state or the Brezhnev Doctrine of Soviet expansionism...,” adding, “he was the first Soviet leader I know of who hadn't done so” (Reagan 1990:641). Coming from Reagan, this was a compliment.

These positive feelings were reflected in the handwritten draft of a letter Reagan wrote to Gorbachev immediately following the meeting: “I came away from the meeting with a better understanding of your attitudes. I hope you also understand mine better.” He concluded the letter by reiterating how pleased he was about their private meeting and suggesting that the two leaders “set a goal—privately, just between the two of us—to find a practical way to solve the two critical issues I have mentioned by the time we meet in Washington” (Reagan 1985).

During 1986, Reagan continued to voice optimism following Gorbachev's arms control proposals, noting, “this is the first time I can recall any Soviet leader actually being willing to eliminate weapons they already have” (United States 1986:330). This and other similar statements contrasted significantly with other US officials and intelligence agencies who dismissed Gorbachev's gestures as simply propaganda. Three months later, Reagan took a further step, publicly apologizing for comparing in an earlier speech Gorbachev to Castro, Arafat, and Qadhafi, saying “It was a bad choice of words, because I didn't mean to do that. As I've said, he is the first Russian leader, to my knowledge, that has ever voiced the idea of reducing and even eliminating nuclear weapons. So, I must have goofed some place, because, believe me, I don't put them in the same category” (United States 1986:750). Later in the summer, Reagan again stated

that he found Gorbachev “completely different than others that I had dealt with” (United States 1987:1008, 1082).

Reagan and Gorbachev held their second summit, in Reykjavik, in October 1986. In Reykjavik, Reagan and Schultz were surprised by Gorbachev’s proposals on strategic and intermediate-range missiles, space, defense, and nuclear testing (Reagan 1990:676–677). However, it was the discussion over SDI and the ABM Treaty that broke up the summit. As Reagan recalls in his memoir (and as supported by the transcripts of the meeting), when Gorbachev said that Soviet concessions all hinged on him giving up SDI, Reagan “could not believe it” and was “very disappointed” and “very angry” with the Soviet leader (Reagan 1990:677, 679). But although no agreements on strategic defense were reached, private correspondence between the two leaders following the summit shows that Reykjavik marked, in Matlock’s words, an important “psychological turning point,” especially because it left Reagan with overall strong positive impressions of Gorbachev stemming from his apparent desire to eliminate nuclear weapons and to engage seriously in a constructive dialogue across a full spectrum of issues (Matlock 2005:250).

By the end of 1986, Reagan had begun to draw a clear distinction between the Soviet Union as a communist system, whose ideology he vehemently opposed, and the current leader of the Soviet Union, who as a result of their private interactions, he had learned to like, respect, and understand. These impressions led Reagan to view Gorbachev as sincere in his intentions to reduce tensions between the two superpowers, and consequently to voice more optimism about future change in the relations relative to other members of his administration. To the extent that during these two years the Soviet Union had yet to undertake costly initiatives, the change in Reagan’s assessments, and the repeated references to his impressions of Gorbachev’s to justify his judgments appear to be inconsistent with the costly actions thesis, but consistent with the personal interaction one.

Costly Reassurance and Personal Interactions: 1987–1988

The period of 1987 and 1988 was characterized by Soviet actions that the US side did view as costly, and which helped contribute to Reagan’s more benign views of Soviet intentions; at the same time, however, the archival evidence reveals that these signals were viewed as reassuring, in part at least, due to the growing confidence and the sense of partnership that was unfolding between the two leaders. Reagan’s positive impressions of Gorbachev were inferred to a large extent from private interactions during the summit meetings in Washington and Moscow; in turn, Reagan cited these as evidence that Gorbachev was genuinely seeking to reduce tensions with the United States. This is visible in both the public and private reasoning Reagan provided for the change in his beliefs. Furthermore, Reagan repeatedly emphasized that it was his growing perceptions of Gorbachev’s sincerity and trustworthiness—a perception stemming primarily from their personal interactions and then later reinforced by costly Soviet actions—that allowed him to change

his beliefs about the nature of the competition between the two countries. Concisely, there was an important interactive effect between Reagan’s growing confidence in his personal impressions of Gorbachev’s sincerity and Reagan’s entreaties for costly actions from the Soviet leader as further credible signs of intentions. This is nicely captured in the Russian proverb Reagan repeatedly used to characterize his relationship with Gorbachev during that period: “Trust but verify” (United States 1987:626–627).

Throughout 1987, Reagan expressed his growing optimism that Gorbachev was serious about “taking a different track and really means to set a different course than had been set before” (United States 1987:571). In June, Reagan said that he found him to be “a personable gentleman” (United States 1987:626–627) but also urged Gorbachev to make “tangible changes” in Soviet policies (United States 1987:594–595, 624, 635–636, 988, and 1038). As the Washington summit approached, Reagan voiced cautious optimism mainly on the basis of his perceptions of Gorbachev and provided two reasons why the Soviet Union under Gorbachev was indeed “quite different.” He said,

...he is the first one—no other Russian leader has ever agreed to eliminate weapons they already have.... He is also the first Russian leader who has never reiterated before the great national Communist congress that the Soviets are pledged to a world expansion—a one-world Communist state. That has been the stated goal of previous leaders. He has said no such thing. (United States 1987:1404)⁶

The Washington summit in December 1987 marked an important step in the evolution of the Reagan–Gorbachev relationship. Although important disagreements persisted, Matlock notes, “Reagan’s meetings with Gorbachev in Washington were notably more harmonious than they had been in either Geneva or Reykjavik” (Matlock 2005:274). Similarly, when Gorbachev left Washington, Reagan wrote in his diary, “I think the whole thing was the best summit we’ve ever had with the Soviet Union” (Reagan 1990:701). Reagan’s assessments of Gorbachev’s sincerity began to further solidify following the Washington summit, as was evident from Reagan’s public statements. To be sure, Soviet costly actions (signing the INF) played a critical role in the transformation of relations. Yet, in explaining his sense of optimism, Reagan increasingly referred to the special rapport he had established with Gorbachev. Asked whether he still believed the Soviet Union was an “evil empire,” Reagan said:

...with regard to the evil empire. I meant it when I said it, *because under previous leaders* they have made it evident that they were based—or that their program was based on expansionism, on going forward toward the Marxist philosophy of the one-world Communist state...*And it was true that there was a philosophy then, under the previous leaders, that there was no immorality in anything that furthered the cause of socialism, therefore permitting themselves to violate trust, to lie, and so forth. There*

⁶ See also United States (1987:1406).

seems to be an entirely different relationship. (United States 1987:1508–1509; our emphasis).

Reagan also grew more confident that he and Gorbachev “shared the same worldview about nuclear disarmament” (United States 1987:1510). In the period leading to the Moscow summit, Reagan continued to link his optimism for change in the relations to his personal impressions of Gorbachev. Asked whether he could have imagined coming to Moscow for a summit at the beginning of his presidency, he replied:

Probably not, because very frankly, I have to say I think there is a difference between this General Secretary and other leaders of your country that I had met with in the past...And no, I could not have foreseen your present leader. (Reagan 1988b).

Then, when asked what sources he had quoted from to support his past assertions that Soviet goals were expansionist, Reagan answered:

Now, as I say, I can't recall all of the sources from which I gleaned this... But I also know—and this didn't require reading Lenin—that *every leader, every General Secretary but the present one had, in appearances before the Soviet Congress, reiterated their allegiance to that Marxian theory that the goal was a one-world Communist state. This man has not said that.* So, I wasn't making anything up; these were the things we were told. (Reagan 1988a,b; our emphasis)

When asked whether he considered Gorbachev as a “real friend,” Reagan responded,

Well, I can't help but say yes to that because the difference that I've found between him and other previous leaders that I have met with is that, yes, we can debate, and we disagree, and it is true he's made it apparent that he believes much of the Communist propaganda that he's grown up hearing about our country that—the big corporations and whether they dictate to government or not and things of that kind. I try to disabuse him of those beliefs. But there is never a sense of personal animus when the arguments are over, and I'm reasonably optimistic, although at the same time I'm realistic. The only Russian I know is a little Russian proverb....And that is, *Dovorey no provorey—trust but verify.* (Reagan 1988a,b)

The culminating point of 1988 was the fourth Moscow summit between the two leaders in May, which Reagan defined as the “most memorable” one. The Moscow summit reinforced Reagan's view that Soviet intentions were becoming more benign. On June 1, 1988, he declared that in his view the Cold War was over. To be sure, changes in Soviet behavior, both in foreign and in domestic policies, were mentioned by Reagan and his advisers as important indicators from which Soviet objectives could be inferred. Reagan repeatedly emphasized that he was satisfied with the progress on all parts of United States–Soviet agenda, but at the same time was very clear in his statements that the changes he had observed in Soviet behavior were the result of Gorbachev's actions, claiming:

I think that a great deal of it is due to the General Secretary, who I have found different than previous Soviet leaders have been....And I think that enough progress has been made that we can look with optimism on future negotiations (United States 1988:708–709).

In a follow-up question, Reagan insisted that a change in his perceptions did not occur because he had had an opportunity to learn more about the Soviet Union over the years. Rather, he claimed, “a large part of it [the process of change in his perceptions] is Mr. Gorbachev as a leader” (United States 1988).⁷

As for the importance of costly Soviet actions during 1987 and 1988, the empirical record is only partially consistent with the predictions of the costly actions thesis. First, Reagan did make references to Soviet willingness to sign the INF Treaty, to withdraw from Afghanistan, and to undertake costly democratic reforms domestically as important indicators of change in Soviet foreign policy behavior. But these same actions were also observed by other key members of his administrations who did not perceive these actions as costly in any informative way. Consider the views of Reagan's Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger, who saw no alteration whatsoever in Soviet intentions, or in Gorbachev's sincerity notwithstanding costly Soviet actions. This appears to pose a challenge to the rationalist requirement that in the face of significant disconfirming evidence, even those with strong prior beliefs would exhibit some degree of Bayesian updating. That Weinberger never updated his beliefs illuminates the limitations of the costly signaling argument in this case.

Notably, the two senior individuals who were willing to recognize costly Soviet efforts at reassurance, and whose beliefs changed most drastically, were Reagan and Shultz. Both of these individuals also had close and repeated interactions with Gorbachev and the Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Indeed, Shultz admits that he developed a very special, personal, relationship with Shevardnadze, leading Shultz to trust his word that the Soviets would withdraw from Afghanistan in five months to a year. Shultz explains in his memoir that although both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had expressed intentions to withdraw from Afghanistan on earlier occasions, the United States “saw no evidence on the ground to lend credence to their statements.” Yet, Shevardnadze's assurances “were different,” Shultz explains: “I had enough confidence by this time in my relationship with Shevardnadze that I knew he would not deliberately mislead me” (Shultz 1993:987).

In conclusion, scholars have long noted that Reagan and Gorbachev had good chemistry. We, however, seek to take this assertion a step further. Reagan repeatedly cited his impressions of Gorbachev from their private meetings as contributing to this change, and was doing so even before the United States had perceived

⁷ Reagan even defended Gorbachev's emigration policies, claiming that it was Soviet bureaucracy that was to blame and not Gorbachev's policies (United States 1988:712–713).

costly actions by the Soviets. One could argue it was the actual content of Gorbachev's statements that mattered—for instance the lack of ideology and his willingness to abolish nuclear weapons. But even here, it is not clear why Reagan should have viewed these statements as credible as opposed to a deceptive show. Our argument stresses the role of the impressions Reagan gleaned from his interactions with Gorbachev in influencing sincerity judgments. Indeed, in public statements, Reagan himself quite explicitly substantiated his judgments with reference to his personal interactions with the Soviet leader. Moreover, Reagan's positive impressions of Gorbachev helped sustain the momentum of the process of trust once more costly signals of reassurance did arrive. Certainly, Reagan demanded of Gorbachev certain actions to substantiate claims about a commitment to reconciliation. But the private concessions, assurances, and their shared vision on nuclear weapons were not considered in Reagan's eyes as cheap talk. Rather, as Frank Carlucci observes, "the personal bonds that began to develop between the president and Gorbachev, between George and Shevardnadze," led to "the gradual building of trust" (Wohlforth 1996:46). Shultz adds, "one reason they respected each other was that they both could see that the other guy was saying what he thought. Maybe you did not agree with him and maybe you did. But there it was. It wasn't maneuvering and manipulating and trying to make some obscure point. It was right there. It was real. What you saw was what you got" (Wohlforth 1996:105).

Not All Impressions Are Positive: Kennedy–Khrushchev

The above cases should not lead us to assume that personal impressions will necessarily have a positive effect on assessments of sincerity. American and Soviet scholars have long argued that despite costly US signals intended to demonstrate to resolve vis-à-vis Soviet attempts to change the status quo in Europe, Khrushchev placed stock in his impressions of Kennedy during the Vienna Summit of June 1961. There is some evidence indicating that Kennedy's performance during that summit left Khrushchev believing the American president was young, inexperienced, and not prepared to make tough decisions facing a determined adversary (Reston 1964; Abel 1968:37; George and Smoke 1974:464–465). For instance, a month after the summit, Khrushchev noted angrily before the Presidium:

Look, we helped elect Kennedy last year. Then we met with him in Vienna....But what does he say? 'Don't ask for too much. Don't put me in a bind. If I make too many concessions, I'll be turned out of office.' Quite a guy! He comes to a meeting, but can't perform. What the hell do we need a guy like that for? Why waste time talking to him? (Fursenko and Naftali 1997:134)

Khrushchev himself later recalled that he had observed that the young Kennedy was "not only anxious, but deeply upset" (Khrushchev 1974:499) and that "he could tell" from their meeting that Kennedy would not want to go to war over Berlin (Khrushchev

1970:458, 1974:562–572; Zubok and Pleshakov 1996:248). Some scholars have taken this argument a step further, claiming that Kennedy's irresolute behavior during the summit influenced Khrushchev's decision to later place missiles in Cuba.⁸ While the evidence is mixed (Lebow and Stein 1995:408–409), there is little doubt both leaders drew important inferences about each others' sincerity from these meetings. Indeed, even those who have taken issue with the argument that Kennedy appeared irresolute in Vienna still concede the importance of interpersonal impressions, arguing that Khrushchev saw Kennedy as having both the nerves and skills to defend US policy, and consequently was quite cautious in his subsequent offensive actions in Berlin (Khrushchev 1970:491–498; Lebow and Stein 1995:408–409).

Moreover, the evidence seems to suggest that Kennedy was highly concerned about Khrushchev's image of him as a result of their private interactions, indicating the value Kennedy placed on shaping Khrushchev's personal perceptions. Shortly after parting with Khrushchev, Kennedy stated that the summit meeting had been the "roughest thing in my life," adding "He just beat the hell out of me. I've got a terrible problem if he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts. Until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him" (Reston 1964). Furthermore, stunned by the premier's brutish personality and off-color humor after experiencing it in person, Kennedy told his brother that he was shocked "that somebody would be as harsh and definitive" as the Soviet leader (Dallek 2003:414). Our simple point with this illustration is that impressions can also work in a negative direction.

Conclusion

This paper provides an initial theoretical and empirical foray into the role of personal impressions in shaping how leaders evaluate the sincerity of their counterparts. Although not proposing that personal impressions eclipse all other indicators of sincerity, we do argue that leaders can and do take their subjective impressions as information about the sincerity of their opposites in ways unexpected by traditional rationalist approaches. Going forward, this project has important implications for both the study and practice of international relations.

Regarding future research, the significance of personal impressions conceivably extends to multiple types of relationships. While we have focused on adversarial, great power relations, there is no reason for our claims being limited to this domain. Leaders also evaluate the sincerity of allies upon whose commitments they depend, of clients that may have incentives to abuse their patronage, and of neutral actors which may make promises in return for aid. It is highly plausible that these latter types of relationships are also subject to the dynamics that we have outlined above. The example of Ahmed Chalabi's ability to amass sup-

⁸ See Richard Ned Lebow's interview with Fedor Burlatsky and Arkady Shevchenko, although he questions their credibility as a source (Lebow and Stein 1995:408–409).

port within the United States prior to the Iraq war would, for instance, seem to be a prime case of a potential client fostering positive personal impressions to political advantage (Roston 2008).

In terms of policy implications, there is the issue of the normative consequences of our argument. While we did not explicitly examine the desirability of the outcomes that resulted from using personal interactions as information about sincerity, the Chamberlain–Hitler case would seem to suggest that leaders should be careful in trusting their impressions. That said, trust in positive personal impressions can allow for leaders the possibility to move beyond past patterns of hostility, as the Regan–Gorbachev case would appear to illustrate. Personal impressions thus may open possibilities, but leaders should nevertheless be cautious.

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