**[Personal diplomacy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1423421/personal-diplomacy)**

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PRESIDENT Donald Trump’s decision to invite President Vladimir Putin to Washing­ton D.C., within days of his return from the Helsinki summit with Russia’s president, and the fiasco of Trump’s other summits at Brussels and Singapore, illustrate the perils of personal diplomacy. It can bring into disrepute, in consequence, the institution of summitry also. They are held ordinarily after extensive spadework by professional diplomats.

There is much to be said for heads of states or governments meeting to exchange opinions with a view to removing obstacles in the diplomatic process which they alone can remove, besides, sizing up each other’s intentions and approach. None of this dispenses with professional input.

What is disturbing about Trump’s forays is his utter disdain for professional diplomats. His first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, denuded the State Department of persons of ability and experience, which he himself lacked. So does his successor Mike Pompeo. Not surprisingly, Trump’s meeting with North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore yielded little of substance. The recrimination that followed in its wake between the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and US Secretary of State Pompeo caused little surprise. The secretary had no experience in diplomacy at all. Trump’s tragedy is that he compounds his own incompetence by relying on inept advisers.

*Politicians have a strange distrust of professionals.*

Far worse followed the Helsinki summit. Trump was eager, far too eager, for it. Putin also desired it because after the Crimean crisis the West went overboard in its drive to ‘punish’ Russia. Trump’s contradictory statements immediately after the summit on his return to the United States betrayed his ineptitude.

The conduct of diplomacy is a complicated affair because the affairs of the state have become more complex. What George F. Kennan called ‘megaphone diplomacy’ reigns supreme. Leaders inflame public opinion in order to mobilise public opinion for the ends of domestic politics; only to find their hands tightly tied when they embark on personal diplomacy to resolve difference with the adversary state, without preparatory work in secret by professionals.

If Trump has no experience in foreign affairs, neither has India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He plunged into personal diplomacy no sooner had he occupied the prime minister’s chair in New Delhi. The summit at Wuhan with President Xi Jinping is the latest in the series. Modi has sought vigorously to acquire domestic support and note in the world at large. Little has been achieved.

Politicians have a strange distrust of professionals. Roosevelt thought he could deal with ‘Uncle Joe’ (Stalin) better than Winston Churchill who had at least 30 years of experience behind him. A recently published volume of letters exchanged among the three The Kremlin Letters, edited by David Reynolds and Vladimir Pechatnov, shows that Churchill understood and performed better.

Leaders develop attitudes which awareness of their own limitations does not alter. One ambassador to the US noted that president Truman “regarded his own State Department as a hostile foreign power”. Israel’s foreign minister Abba Eban’s description of his problems with the prime minister is invaluable. It is so true of most of such relationships. “Golda Meir considered the diplomatic professionals to be too polished, excessively inclined to understand diverse points of view and in some regrettable cases afflicted with analytical and intellectual habits that did not facilitate contact between them and her.

“Golda’s talent lay in the simplification of issues: she went straight to the crux and centre of each problem. Foreign policy specialists, on the other hand, are conscious of the intrinsic complexity of international relations. They perceive the multiple elements that go into most decisions and policies. They react with resignation to the idea that Israel’s vital interests are not all that vital to non-Israelis. They are also aware of the volatile atmosphere of a profession in which contingencies can be created overnight by forces alien and external to their own nation.... The trouble with foreign policy is that it is foreign.

“Since Golda was a tough character with a domineering streak, the temptation for senior officials to adapt their advice to her prejudice was strong. ... The very word ‘analysis’ provoked her to irritability. When officials analysed the contradictory waves of influence that flowed into decision-making, she tended to interrupt them with an abrupt request for the bottom line. The quest for the ‘simple truth’ was not easy when, as often happens, the truth is not simple at all.”

However, leaders do matter; provided that they have insights and command respect — Gorbachev, Churchill, de Gaulle and Aden­auer come to mind. They led. Lesser mortals must depend on professionals and not rush alone into the turbulent waters of diplomacy which are often beyond their depth.

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