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# Analysis Of The Meeting Between Donald Trump And Kim Jong-Un Using Geert Hofstede's Theory

## Introduction

For several decades there has been a certain tension between North Korea and The United States of America (henceforth the US). Even though these tensions have existed for a long period of time, the conflict between the two countries has intensified over the last couple of years. In 2005 North Korea seriously began to rearm. After the death of Kim Jong-Il in 2011, Kim Jong-un (henceforth Kim) gained control over North Korea as their new dictator and continued rearming. Since 2006 more nuclear test explosions have been made in North Korea and each time the explosions have become more intensive and can reach even further.

Donald Trump (henceforth Trump) was elected as president on January the 20th 2017. He strongly opposed the actions that were taking place in North Korea, which resulted in a higher political power game between the two countries. The conflict seemed to escalate even further as several different and aggressive treats were being given. In the midst of this chaos, it was announced that the two leaders were going to meet for a summit on June the 12th 2018. The meeting took place in Singapore and it lasted for less than an hour after which the two leaders signed an agreement. The meeting was extraordinary, as it was the first time two sitting leaders of the two countries meet. In addition, it was considered to be a very important meeting, due to the threat that North Korea posed to the US and the rest of the world. Therefore, the meeting was considered as an opportunity to lower the tensions and secure peace.

As it was the first time that two leaders from the two cultures meet, it is interesting to examine the cultural differences and similarities that may have been present at the summit and in that regard, what the two leaders should have been aware of. This paper will illuminate these differences and similarities using Geert Hofstede's theory (henceforth Hofstede's theory). However, the paper will also illuminate some of the general cultural barriers that are not covered by Hofstede's theory. Furthermore, the paper will be critical of the theory and its use.

## Geert Hofstede's theory

Before commencing the analysis itself, it is relevant to explain the meaning and background of the theory. Geert Hofstede (henceforth Hofstede) is a prominent cultural analyst. Hofstede's theory is based on observations of employees from different departments around the world. The purpose of Hofstede's theory is to demonstrate the differences and similarities between cultures. The focus in this paper will however, primarily be on the differences.

## Culture

The term culture is often used, but what is culture? In order to make use of Hofstede's theory, it is important to define the word culture. Culture is often used to describe art such as music, dance etc. But culture can also be a common way of living – a way to describe a certain way to live. People from the same culture do often have the same view on the outside world. It means

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that they often strive for the same and have a similar view on things. However, it does not mean that there cannot be differences in the culture, but the culture affects the way we act and the standards we strive to live by.

People are automatically being influenced by their cultures. Culture can therefore be described as a social behaviour and the norms that can be found within a certain society. Because cultures can be so different, problems can arise when people from different cultures meet. It is these differences, but also similarities, between cultures that Hofstede tries to help people understand. Hofstede uses six cultural dimensions in order to describe differences and similarities in the values of cultures.

## **The six dimensions**

### **Power distance**

This dimension is about the extent to which power differences and inequalities in the society are accepted. People in cultures with a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical social order. Each has their own place in society and there are big inequalities. The one in power is always right and changes in the political system can only be done by revolution. In societies with a low degree of power distance inequalities are undesirable and should be reduced. Everyone has the same rights and political issues are solved by dialogue.

### **Individualism versus collectivism**

This dimension is about whether the individual focuses on being an independent individual taking care of its own interest or whether it is more important for the individual to focus on the interest of the collective. People in a collectivist culture think “we” whereas people in an individualistic culture think “I”. In collectivist cultures, the state plays a dominant role and people think about their families and companies instead of just thinking about themselves. In the individualistic culture, the state plays a more passive role and it is important that people say their honest opinions although it may cause conflicts in the groups that they are a part of.

### **Masculinity versus femininity**

There is a lot of competition in the masculine culture and it is very important that men are confident and ambitious. It is also important that the strong in society are being supported. In the feminine culture, the welfare system is of important and there is a great sympathy for the weak in society. There is equality, women in politics and people try to solve their conflicts through negotiation.

### **Uncertainty avoidance index**

Every culture has its own way to deal with the uncertainty. In cultures with small uncertainty avoidance, people tackle problems as they appear and they see innovation as a good thing. In addition people have a more relaxed relationship to the few applying rules in society. Everyday life is more stressful in a culture with large uncertainty avoidance. Innovation is not seen as a good thing but a threat to society because it is different. Law and order are very important in order to make the society work.

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## **Long-term orientation versus short-term orientation**

This dimension is about time and how changes and challenges are being looked at within the culture. Short-term orientation focuses on the present and achieving results within a short period of time. In a long-term orientated culture, people focus more on thrift and persistence in order to achieve great results in the future.

## **Indulgence versus restraint**

This dimension is about whether the individual freely and openly cultivates their own happiness by satisfying their basic needs. Individuals who live in an indulgence culture are outgoing, positive and optimistic about life and future. In a culture dominated by restraint, there are strict norms that regulated the lives of the individual and people have a more pessimistic view on life.

## **Analysis of the meeting between Trump and Kim**

It is important to be familiar with the cultural values in the US and North Korea, in order to make an analysis of the summit. The US values are relatively easy to identify, as it is an open and globalized country. It is harder to identify and make proper/reliable research of the North Korean values, because the country/society is very closed. It is not easy to be let into their world and if people do, they are in complete control over the information that is being given to them and thereby the outside world. It is also the reason why it is not possible to find Hofstede's North Korean cultural values. They are simply too hard to identify. However, it may be able to identify the North Korean values by looking at South Korea, as they constituted Korea before being divided. Even though it is decades ago, it takes time to develop and change values, why it cannot be excluded that some of the same still exist. Some of the South Korean values will therefor be used to identify the North Korean values in the analysis. In addition, values in other Asian countries will also be used in order to determine the values in North Korea.

## **The six dimensions**

### **Power distance**

In most Asia countries, there is a large power distance. This also applies to North Korea, where there are a big difference between average individuals and the individuals who are in power. Compared to North Korea the US has a low power distance, which indicates that they have a greater equality in society. Power distance can influence who negotiates and negotiators may risk negotiating with someone who is not particular high in the hierarchy. It may also affect the authority that the negotiator possesses, which is of importance for the negotiation. In cultures with a low degree of power the negotiator often has the authority to make agreements, whereas an agreement in a culture with a large degree of power often has to be ratified by a person in the high end of the hierarchy. Both North Korea and the US sent their highest leaders to negotiate, why both had sufficient authority. If one of the countries had sent another negotiator, who did not have the necessary competence to enter into agreements, it could have affected the negotiation in a negative way. If North Korea, for example had sent someone lower in hierarchy, who did not have the necessary authority it could have reduced Trumps incentive to negotiate and enter into agreements. Lack of authority and capability to enter into agreements can make the negotiation less effective.

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Due to authority, both parties possess great power, which could have had a negative impact on the negotiations. Before and during the negotiations there was a high political power game, where both parties wanted to be in control and show that they were capable of influencing the other party's ideas and behaviour. During the summit both parties wanted to show that they were in control, which especially was expressed through their body languages. This could have made the tensions between the two parties even worse, which could have resulted in no agreement being reached. Even though Trump comes from a culture with low power distance and Kim from a culture with high power distance, this cultural difference does not seem to have influenced or been a barrier in the negotiation in relation to who the negotiating parties were and whether they had sufficient authority. However, it cannot be excluded that the ongoing power game could have affected the negotiations.

### **Individualism versus collectivism**

The US has one of the most individualist cultures in the world, which is different from a lot of Asian countries, where collectivism is essential. As many of the Asian countries place great emphasis on collectivism North Korea must also be assumed to be a collectivist's culture. It is normal that collectivist cultures negotiate in groups instead of as individuals. It would therefore be conceivable that Kim was not alone in the negotiations. However, even though Kim is from a collectivist culture, as opposed to Trump, the meeting took place only with the presence of interpreters.

In addition, the negotiation process is often slow in collectivist cultures, which could have had an impact on the negotiation. Trump is from an individualist culture, where you look at time differently than in collectivist cultures, why it was important that both parties paid attention to the pace of time during the negotiation. If Trump did not possess patience, it could put Kim under unnecessary pressure, which could have ruined the negotiation. Conversely, Kim must have been careful not to delay the process too much, in order not to impede progress. Finally, this dimension could also have affected the goals that both parties had for the negotiation. As mentioned above, people from individualist cultures often think about the interest of themselves before the interest of the group, whereas collectivist cultures think about the interest of the group before thinking about themselves. Not having the same mindset can be an obstacle in the negotiations. However, even though the US is an individualist culture, Trump negotiated on behalf of the country and was therefore forced to think about the interest of the group, why it did not seem to be an obstacle. Although both parties had the interest of their people in mind, there could still have been some barriers in relation to what they wanted to achieve. Trump wanted peace and Kim to shut down his nuclear weapons programme. In addition he wanted to discuss human rights. It was contrary to Kim's interest, as he did not want to talk about human rights but rather economic development in North Korea. Even though the parties had conflicting interests it was important that the parties acknowledged and listened to each other's desires in order to move forward.

Even though Trump is from an individualist culture and Kim from a collectivist culture, it does not seem to have had a big impact on the negotiations. It must however be noted, that there are several factors that Trump and Kim should have been aware of in order not to offend each other, since there is a big cultural difference in this dimension.

### **Masculinity versus femininity**

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The US is considered to be a masculine culture, which means that they are driven by success, achievements and competition. South Korea is considered to be a feminine culture. However, they have a score of only 39 on masculinity, which means that they are not far from being in-between a masculine and feminine culture. The same must be assumed to apply to North Korea, which would be consistent with the fact that they have a collectivist mindset. Whether a culture is to be characterized as a masculine or feminine culture is of great importance for the negotiating parties view on relationships. Cultural barriers may arise in the sense that feminine cultures often care more about the relationship whereas masculine cultures tend to be more competitive and make more use of distributive bargaining when negotiating.

Both countries had expressed that they wished to establish a good relationship. However, it can be questioned whether it really was because they wanted to establish a good relationship or just because they depended on each other in order to achieve their goals. The US main wish was to reduce the threats posed by North Korea whereas North Korea's main wish was economic growth. The US had to maintain a good relationship to ensure a peaceful and secure future. North Korea had to maintain a good relationship, as the US has a big impact on the rest of the world and the world economy, why they needed the support of the US in order to achieve economic growth.

Even though the relationship seemed to be important for both parties, it can be discussed whether the relationship was more important to North Korea, which would be consistent with the feminine culture. When Trump initially cancelled the meeting, North Korea stated, that Kim had done anything to ensure that the summit continued and that he was still hoping to solve the problems with the US. This indicates that North Korea had a greater interest in the summit being conducted at all costs. Furthermore, it can be argued that Trump cancelled the meeting to put pressure on Kim and show him, that he possesses a lot of power. The use of power is consistent with the fact that the US is a masculine culture. The fact that the United States is a masculine culture and North Korea a feminine culture, may have affected the negotiations to a certain extent. Whether the parties really want to establish a relationship is hard to say, but much suggests that they need each other in order to achieve their goals. The fact that North Korea seemed more interested in building a relation to the US would, however, be consistent with Hofstede's theory and view on relationship. Uncertainty avoidance index The US scores 46 on the uncertainty avoidance index. It means that they are open to new ideas and innovation while they do not require a lot of rules in order to make the society work. It is quite different with South Korea as they are one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries in the world. It must also be assumed that North Korea has high uncertainty avoidance. Although North Korea is a closed country, the outside world is aware that a lot of tough rules apply and that law and order is very important. Innovation is not seen as something positive and it is properly illegal to some extent, due to regulation and control. In addition, people in Asian countries are known to work hard and to be precise and punctual.

This is also the case in North Korea, which is consistent with the fact that North Korea has high uncertainty avoidance. This dimension could have affected the negotiation in the sense that people from a culture with high uncertainty avoidance are likely to be more thorough and strict when planning the negotiation. It could have been a barrier if Kim wanted a more detailed and thorough planning as opposed to Trump, why it is important that the parties during the summit understood and was aware of each other's view on changes and surprises. It could have been a barrier if Trump was willing to take more chances and close the deal early whereas Kim Jong-un wanted more information. It would put pressure on both parties', which could have a negative

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effect on the negotiation.

## **Long-term orientation versus the short-term orientation**

The US is a short-term oriented culture whereas North Korea is long-term oriented. It can be assumed on basis that South Korea has a score of 100, Japan 88 and China 87. This indicates that some of the surrounding Asian countries are thinking long-term. If North Korea had long-term goals for the negotiation while the US had short-term goals it can be a barrier and have impact on the negotiations. It may cause the parties to talk past each other or having difficulties understanding each other's expectations and goals.

## **Other barriers**

Besides the dimensions described in Hofstede's theory, there might be other factors, which could have influenced the negotiation.

## **Credibility**

Credibility is important when negotiating. If the negotiating parties do not trust each other it can be hard to move forward. It is often easier to trust a person that you have interacted with before or have a certain relationship with. Since there have been intense tensions between the two countries for decades, it could have been difficult for the parties to trust each other. It could be a barrier in the negotiation, as it can be hard to move forward when you cannot rely on the other part.

## **Language barrier**

Another barrier, which could have affected the negotiation, is the language barrier. Kim's English skills are not known but as mentioned above interpreters attended the summit, which indicates that there could have been some language barriers. The language challenges and use of interpreters could have caused misunderstandings to arise quickly. It can often be difficult to make a direct translation, why a minor deviation can change the whole meaning of the sentence. That is why it was important that the parties do not use sarcasm linguistic twists, as it could be difficult for the other part to understand. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that there might have been some language barriers during the meeting, which the following could be an example of.

## **Communication skills**

Communication skills are also a decisive factor and very closely connected to Hofstede's theory. If you do not know how to communicate properly misunderstandings and insults can arise quickly. You have to be careful about how you behave and speak. Before the working lunch at the summit, Donald Trump said: "Getting a good picture everybody? So we look nice and handsome and thin, and perfect". After this comment, Kim Jong-un seemed very angry. Although it properly was meant as a joke, Trump should have been more careful, as he could not know how Kim interprets it. A comment like this could quickly have destroyed the negotiations as it could have been seen as an insult. In many Asian countries, especially China,

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it is important not to lose face. The same might apply in North Korea why it was important for Trump not to make Kim lose his face. You can prevent someone from losing face by not embarrassing or ruin the other person's reputation. In addition, it is important not to point out mistakes openly and treat the other person with respect. Trump should have been aware of this concept about losing face before making his comment.

Communication skills do not only deal with the way negotiating parts speak to each other but also the skills and knowledge they have about negotiating. Before the summit, many analysts were sceptical due to Trump's lack of knowledge about negotiating. This was mainly because Trump only had been in power for a short period of time whereas Kim had been in power for several years, why he has made significant negotiations before. In addition, Kim is always known to be really well prepared as opposed to Trump who is known to have "short attention span for briefings", which caused people in the US to fear that the negotiation would not be in their favour. This is closely related to the above-mentioned description of uncertainty avoidance index, whereas cultures with high uncertainty avoidance are more likely to be more thorough and strict in the planning of the negotiation.

## **Criticism of Hofstede's theory**

Hofstede's theory has been criticized for being too static as it does not change or develop. The theory is relatively old, and since it does not take into account how cultures changes over time, it can be argued that the theory does not give a accurate picture as it only shows how it was at that time. As it can be seen in the above analysis, there are many factors that Hofstede describes in his theory that does not consist with the real world anymore. It also emerges that, although there have been some significant cultural differences it does not seem to have affected the negotiation considerably. In addition, it can also be criticized that the cultural dimensions are too simplistic and do not give a good picture of reality, which is far more diverse. Culture is not necessarily the same all over the country, which is factor that the theory does not take into account.

The theory can also be criticised for not being representative as it is based solely on observations of IBM employees. The outcome would properly be different if Hofstede had made observations of another group of people.