"A Sense of His Soul"
The Relation between Presidents Putin and Bush

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It is an unfortunate truism that relations between the United States and Russia depend a great deal on the interpersonal connection between the two countries. Of course, personalities do not determine foreign policy as much as national interests or even domestic politics do, but they do shape the way national interests are defined and stratagems devised. In this case, the presidents of both countries have a fairly free hand in setting foreign policy, and there are few institutional and social networks between the two countries that could anchor their diplomatic relations on firmer ground. So the relationship between the leaders has been very important.

There is nothing to suppose that this situation will change in the next four years. If anything, the institutional and civic ties between the two countries have diminished somewhat over the last four years, with no prospect of a revival. In addition, both presidents have sought to further limit the domestic constraints on their foreign policy. For better or for worse, the personal connection between George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin will loom large in the future of U.S.-Russian relations.

To date, these two leaders have gotten along pretty well. At their first meeting in April 2001, President Bush declared that he had looked into Putin's eye and got "a sense of his soul." This initial rapport was reinforced after the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11. Putin ignored doubts within Russia's political elite and offered the United States valuable assistance during the war in Afghanistan. Bush, for his part, largely accepted Putin's appropriation of the war on terror as a rhetorical cover for Russian human rights violations in Chechnya. The personal bond was further demonstrated in October 2004, when Putin unambiguously endorsed Bush in the U.S. Presidential campaign.

Yet the relationship has experienced some friction, particularly recently. Members of the Bush administration have begun publicly to question Putin's commitment to democracy after the "reforms" Putin announced in September of this year, while Putin cannot have been pleased with U.S. support of reformist challenges in Georgia and Ukraine.

This memo examines the personal styles and world views of these two leaders to consider what brings them together and what might pull them apart, while evaluating the implications this relationship has on U.S.-Russian relations.

Soulmates?

What has bound these two leaders together? In the first place, both Putin and Bush place a high premium on the "manly" values of personal fortitude, strength, consistency, loyalty, and resolve. Like Gary Cooper in the movie "High Noon," they present themselves as lone individuals standing between lawful order and lawless chaos. In both cases, this attitude can be traced to the stories these leaders tell of their own past: both look back to a turning point in their life, a point where they gained the self-discipline to turn away from a dissolute life toward success. Putin credits judo lessons early in his life for taking him off the streets; Bush, as we know, attributes his self-control to a personal conversion. As a result, both regard personal self-control as necessary to protect individuals from a natural inclination towards dissolution and immorality. Even today, both maintain a strict regimen of physical exercise and abstain from heavy drinking. Both implicitly contrast their own practices of self-control with the less disciplined habits of their predecessors.

These leaders' commitment to discipline, strength, and resolution can also be seen in their foreign policy: each seeks to assert the sovereignty of their respective countries in a dangerous world. These men reject the so-called "postmodern" diplomacy of the European Union; they distrust the constraints of multilateral institutions and use them only to pursue more narrow purposes. If Putin has proven more willing to work through multilateral agreements and institutions than President Bush, it is simply a reflection of Russia's weaknesses, not a philosophical position. Putin has shown little patience for international criticism of his policies towards Chechnya. Both leaders can be positively shirty when foreign journalists ask uncomfortable questions.

In domestic politics, the urge for self-discipline translates to a willingness to use the organs of the state to protect the body politic from the dangers of dissipation, lawlessness, and outright wickedness. While both leaders applaud the discipline of the market and the pursuit of material gain, they both use the rhetoric of danger to expand and centralize the power of the state not only to protect against terrorism, but also to discourage dissent and encourage their vision of moral self-constraint. It is true, of course, that Putin has followed this road much further than President Bush has, but the institutional and normative constraints placed on the president's policies in the United States are far stronger than those placed on the Russian president, and it is pointless to speculate where President Bush's instincts might take him if the constraints were not there.

Opposing World Views: Putin

Though Bush and Putin agree on many of the same personal qualities needed for effective leadership, they differ profoundly in their world views and leadership styles. While both favor an activist state, their conception of the state and its relation to society are nearly polar opposites. Putin's guiding political philosophy is gosudarstvennost'. This philosophy has deep roots in Russian history: it conceives the state as separate and aloof from society, a concrete manifestation of the collective will. It is the state, not society, that serves as the locus of Russian sovereignty. Individual citizens are free to pursue private interests, so long as this pursuit contributes to and does not detract from the purposes of the state. The state, for its part, must remain aloof from partisan politics and

manage society in the interests of the whole. The essential crime of the oligarchs Gusinsky, Berezovsky, and Khodorkovsky was the temerity they had in publicly placing their own interests over the reason of the state and to seek openly to bend the state to their parochial interests.

For the most part, Putin has sought to restore the integrity and power of the Russian state by following a technocratic approach. Much of the rhetoric of his first term focused on the need to reduce state corruption and install a "dictatorship of law," to restore the "vertical system of power," and to render the Russian legal system and other governmental institutions more rational, efficient, and consistent. Putin also embraced liberal economic reform, not because he advocates capitalism for its own sake, but because he hopes to harness the power of the market to modernize Russia more quickly and efficiently. He makes no bones about enlisting the power of private capital in service to the state. His tendency to appoint members of the FSB to all levels of government service, too, can be seen as part of his effort to restore integrity to state administration; the KGB was often regarded as the most efficient and least corrupt bureaucracy during the last years of the Soviet Union.

Putin's efforts to restore and preserve the state have not only been technocratic, but also relatively cautious. While he has acted decisively against selected oligarchs, he has avoided decisions that might alienate entrenched bureaucratic interests. In foreign policy, he has mostly limited his efforts to assert Russian sovereignty to the territory of the former Soviet Union, and, with the exception of the Caucasus, he has tended to emphasize political, economic, and even ideological levers over overt military threats. Beyond the near abroad, his objectives seem to be maintaining good ties with the United States and each of Russia's neighbors, without committing to an alliance with any of them, in order to ensure an international environment that will enable him to pursue his objectives. While he opposed the U.S. war on Iraq, he did so under European cover. For the most part, he has avoided the kind of blustery rhetoric that Boris Yeltsin used during the intervention in Kosovo.

Opposing World Views: Bush

Whereas Putin believes the state should act as an impartial expression of a putative national will, President Bush embraces the pluralist conception of the state as an extension or reflection of the underlying society, a forum where conflicting ideas and interests compete and compromise. The mission of the state, in this view, is to facilitate the individual pursuit of private interests, not the other way around. For President Bush, then, the assertion of sovereignty is not the assertion of the state so much as the assertion of the U.S. polity.

If President Bush has chosen a more unilateral approach to foreign policy than other recent U.S. presidents, it is because his vision of the U.S. polity is different from theirs. Like Ronald Reagan before him, President Bush imbues U.S. national identity with an almost mystical quality, a city on a hill. But the rhetoric of the current president is much less optimistic, much less inclusive than that of his Republican predecessor. Reflecting his personal concern with discipline and the danger of dissipation, the current president draws the boundaries of acceptable behavior much more narrowly than Reagan did.

Freedom must be temporized by moral constraint if society is to remain healthy. Democracy is to be evaluated not by its procedures, but by its character. Individuals who do not abide by these standards, and who behave in ways that are outside the norm, are not deserving of the protection of the state and may be subject to its discipline.

Thus, Bush's vision of U.S. national identity is informed both by zeal and by fear. It is the zeal that believes the United States polity to be a shining example to all humanity, a belief, as President Bush has put it, in the "transformational quality of liberty." But it is also a vision that defines threats to the nation not only in geopolitical terms but also in ideas that would challenge its universal validity.

Inspired by this vision, President Bush has adopted a leadership style very different from the cautious, technocratic approach of President Putin. He has taken enormous risks to realize his transformational vision of U.S. foreign policy, and he has done so with little reference to expert opinion or scientific consensus. The goal, as one administration official told Ronald Susskind recently in the New York Times Magazine, was to make a new reality rather than adapt to the old one.

The Outlook for Foreign Policy

For all the differences in their world views, I do not expect that relations between these two leaders and their governments will change dramatically over the next four years. Though the relationship will continue to cool down somewhat from the warmth of the first Bush administration, the change is likely to be gradual rather than dramatic. Though President Bush is likely to somewhat tone down the rhetoric of fear so prominent in his first administration, he will need to use it periodically to justify his unilateralism abroad and the budget deficits at home. In this respect, he will continue to rely on Putin as a determined ally in the war on global terror. Putin, meanwhile, can use the United States policy to blunt the critiques of Russia's handling of the war in Chechnya.

Of course there will be many areas, such as Iran and North Korea, where U.S. and Russian interests will diverge. Here Bush's preference for bold, direct action may rub against Putin's cautious approach to foreign policy. So long as these issues do not have any immediate bearing on Putin's interests in the post-Soviet space, Putin is likely to avoid any direct confrontation with the United States. Moreover, in such matters, the two leaders' common commitment to the qualities of consistency, resolve, and loyalty may make it easier for them to agree to disagree. Though Putin believed the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was a "mistake," for example, he assured foreign journalists that "on no occasion did he [Bush} deceive or mislead me. He always does what he says, and in that respect he is a reliable partner."

It is also likely that Putin's moves to a more managed democracy will diminish the U.S. president's high opinion of his Russian counterpart, but perhaps not as much as many observers seem to think. As noted above, President Bush conceives democracy in substantive rather than procedural terms. Because Russia is a Christian country with a leader who speaks of market reform and adheres to the same personal code as himself, President Bush is less likely to see Putin's policies as beyond the pale of respectability. Even during the events last autumn in the Ukraine, President Bush was far less adamant

in his criticism of the election than the Europeans or even Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Putin, for his part, has been far more critical of the United States, castigating the United States for a double standard that condemns the elections in Ukraine while insisting upon the legitimacy of elections in Afghanistan and Iraq. To the extent that Putin interprets this policy as a deliberate effort by President Bush to encroach upon what he believes to be the legitimate sphere of Russian interest, he might regard this as violating the implicit understandings that forged their personal ties. Yet Putin, with his pragmatism, is unlikely to air this disappointment publicly. For all his attacks on U.S. policies, he has reaffirmed his close personal relationship with President Bush. He needs to keep the door open to the United States, if only to make his bids for cooperation with other regional powers more attractive.

In sum, as the Bush administration moves beyond the war on terror and Putin loses his grip on the post-Soviet space, the warm relations between Putin and Bush are likely to cool down during the next four years. Such change is likely to happen gradually rather than suddenly, though, and the overall outlook is one of stability rather than change.