

The Myth of the New Détente: The Roots of Putin's Pro-U.S. Policy

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Over the past year, Russian president Vladimir Putin initiated a stream of diplomatic overtures to probably the most unresponsive and self-centered of U.S. administrations since the U.S. re-emergence from isolationism under president Franklin Roosevelt. Among the most prominent of Putin's gestures are: Moscow's increasing friendliness to NATO and attempts to get NATO involved in Russia's military reform; Putin's decision to shut down Russian bases in Cuba and Vietnam, while, at the same time, his seemingly unperturbed acceptance of the U.S. use of air bases in Central Asian countries bound with Russia by a security treaty; his de-facto readiness to discard earlier insistence upon the primacy of the UN Security Council in conflict resolutions; his markedly conciliatory stand on the ABM Treaty and NATO expansion; and finally, his reluctance to circumscribe Russia's support for the U.S. actions in Afghanistan, or attach conditions to it, at least in public. This pattern has been even more striking for a leader who cannot pass for a naive, inexperienced idealist, and, judging by his consistently hardline posture at home, is not predisposed at all to unilateral concessions.

Meanwhile, the balance sheet of a year of this foreign policy is plainly negative for Russia. The ABM Treaty has been discarded; the militaries of several NATO countries are present on the soil of Russia's immediate neighbors and, at least in a formal sense, allies, and are not rushing to leave; and NATO has apparently opted for the "big bang" scenario of admitting all nine East European applicants, while the plan to re-format Russia's relations with the Alliance into the "group of twenty" giving it an equal voice with others has been shelved. While none of this arguably implies a military threat to Russia, it is a triple political defeat, inasmuch as Russia was vocally objecting to the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and NATO expansion and claiming special security relationship with Central Asian countries. And while under other conditions all this may have been shrugged off as simply unavoidable, the policies pursued by Putin vis-à-vis the United States have made this outcome undeniably demeaning for Russia. On the face of it, it looks like Russia would be no worse off by quietly minding its own business at home without expending so much efforts and prestige on trying to befriend the Bush administration.

The Irrelevance of Domestic Political Variables

What was the driving force behind Putin's breathtaking rapprochement with the United States and NATO? To eliminate the wrong answers, let us start with Russia's domestic politics - or, rather, the absence of it. Under Putin, there has been no political force in the country that would be able to push the Kremlin in a consistently pro- or anti-Western direction. Compared to ten or even three years ago, Russia's political space has become a desert, where almost all of the remaining inhabitants (except for the increasingly irrelevant Communist party), whether out of impotence or out of fear, are clinging to Putin's "big tent", no matter what he does.

Thus, even though he seemingly rode to power on the crest of an ultra-nationalist wave, his turnaround toward NATO during the course of his presidential campaign cost him nothing at home. The Russian Army, surely one of the two most popular institutions in the country, whose political spokesmen clearly advocated a more cautious line with regard to NATO, has been easily pushed around and further marginalized by Putin, who is openly relying upon the generally unpopular intelligence and police agencies - again, seemingly at no political cost to himself. On the other front, his actions in Chechnya, against the media, and consistently regressive environmental policies did not create any major trouble for him with the so-called liberal camp. In this environment, it is no wonder that he found it easy to muster instantaneous support for - or acquiescence to - his pro-western policies, even as the widespread nationalist mood would make it even easier for him to push through a totally different, indeed, an altogether opposite course.

To sum up, the Russian president currently faces fewer domestic political constraints than any of his predecessors since Joseph Stalin, and all the domestic determinants of his international behavior (economic indicators aside) are to be found inside the Kremlin walls. (Big Oil may be one of the few exceptions, but it is ostensibly uninterested in such issues as the ABM Treaty or NATO expansion.) Thus the question about the driving force of Russia's policy mostly boils down to Putin's personal motivations and purposes, which have distinct psychological roots.

Toward the Cognitive School in Kremlinology: The Image of Détente

The key to understanding the preferences and goals of Putin and his entourage lies in their mental and cognitive framework. The latter can be gleaned from content analysis of official statements, the numerous security concepts and doctrines that have been issued, but also and, often more importantly, "impromptu" remarks and "slips of the tongue" (a number of them seemingly pre-meditated and crafted by "political technologists").

Skipping detailed evidence, let us remark that this cognitive framework is but a variation of the prevailing mindset among the post-Soviet intelligence and "biznes" establishment. It mostly involves the people who started their careers in the nomenklatura in the era of détente and were the first generation in the USSR to taste selective and privileged access to Western trips and long-term assignments abroad. Their domestic insulation from the "silent majority" and cultural shocks experienced in these travels shaped their dual attitude to "the West" as they came to know it: envy for the luxury that they were exposed to, coupled with profound mistrust of western democratic culture and the vast spontaneous world of unregulated civil society.

The "children of détente" also absorbed some international elements of its cultural outlook: status-quo pragmatism, reliance on secret diplomacy, and the vague belief in the convergence of the elites of major powers toward an informal global condominium.

The "children of détente" envied and admired what they had been taught to see as the western ruling class, and eventually came to seek a place for themselves, which for them was equivalent to ending the Cold War. It is indicative that to this day prominent post-Soviet representatives of this generation, when reflecting on their past, blame not the repressive socio-political system and the delay in democratization of society, but almost entirely the sluggishness of Soviet rulers in reaching a strategic global deal with their U.S. counterparts.

While both ending the Cold War and achieving the political and economic empowerment of the Russian people and other Soviet subjects were equally worthy goals, the emphasis on the former at the expense of the latter prejudiced the final outcome: the Russians were never consulted about the appropriate way for the state to withdraw from the Cold War, into which they had been drawn without their consent in the first place. By denying the peace dividend and voice to 90 percent of the Russian people, the nomenklatura-managed dismantling of the bipolar system fostered bitterness and profound cynicism among Russians about the basic foundations of the post-Cold War order. And the condition in which Russian society found itself as a result of such a withdrawal transformed what could be an honorable exit into an all too visible defeat, thus undermining the nomenklatura claims for special privilege in the new international system - something that Russia's rulers have not yet fully grasped.

Putin's Formula for Détente

Since Putin's accession to power there have been two discernible trends in Moscow's actions and pronouncements with regard to the United States. The first consisted of manifest overtures toward the U.S.'s more conservative politicians: thus, while pouring cold water on most of the initiatives of the outgoing Clinton administration, Putin sent representatives of his Bear Party to the GOP national convention and went out of his way to establish a personal rapport with President George W. Bush in the first months of his presidency. Uncomfortable with western liberal and human rights criticism that was creating "bad business image" for the Russian oligarchs and government-affiliated merchants and constantly threatening to ostracize them from the much-coveted "civilized world", he calculated that the Gorbachev-style "charm offensive" buttressed by ostentatiously far-reaching concessions to the Bush administration would strengthen the latter, while at the same time marginalizing the Kremlin's western critics.

Another essential element for Putin's formula of Détente was the idea of a credible common threat that would draw Moscow and Washington into a single camp. Accordingly, the second key feature of his policies vis-à-vis the United States was the consistent voicing of the international terrorist menace and, less emphatically, the growing recognition of the WMD proliferation among "rogue states" as a source of common concern for Washington and Moscow.

The tragedy of September 11 and some of its repercussions - including the assumption of unprecedented emergency powers by the U.S. executive with the retreat of liberals and human rights activists, and the recognition of Islamic-related terrorism as the two powers' common enemy (leading, in turn, to the virtual disappearance of Chechnya from the radar screens of international politics) - seemed to give a boost to Putin's strategy. Since then, and until the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, Russia's rulers had been in a markedly offensive, almost

triumphant mode at the international stage, glowing with self-righteousness and satisfaction about the new international lineup where Russia appeared as Washington's most valuable partner. Some openly compared the anti-terrorist coalition with the anti-Hitler alliance between the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain, reminiscing about F.D.R's "big policemen" model of the post-war arrangement. This posture was pathetically exemplified, among others, by one of the "political technologists" (Sergei Markov, formerly an associate of the Moscow Carnegie Center), saying that the world was on the verge of setting up a global government and that, by participating in the U.S.-led coalition, the Russian leadership had a chance to become part of it.

Putin's Perceptual Blunder

For all its sophistication, Putin's strategy had one flaw, and a fatal one: it failed to understand that the Bush administration's thinking and motivations would be fundamentally different from, and plainly opposite to its own.

To a U.S. audience, there is no need to spell out in detail the extent of this gap and of the Kremlin's misperceptions. One need only to point to the Kremlin's failure to grasp the nature and centrality of Bush's unilateralism, the economic motivations behind it, and the ultimate irrelevance of Moscow's loyalty to the Bush administration given the priorities it acts upon. Among its basic perceptual problems is also the chronic inability to see the difference between a market and a battlefield: the post-Soviet nomenklatura genuinely believes that it has been selling off its superpower status for a good price. The Russian elite has never managed to understand that for the Bush administration - as, indeed, for most outside observers - the Kremlin is the U.S.'s vanquished enemy; and there is no "political technology" or PR campaign that would make the United States and the rest of the world pretend otherwise. Indeed, Moscow's every attempt over the past decade to ingratiate and cajole western Cold Warriors only reinforced this picture and the U.S.'s political clout as the war's winners. In this regard, the Kremlin has been stepping over the same rake over and over again. Living in a world of virtual reality, it resists admitting that one's "image" on the world stage - as opposed to its home turf - cannot be entirely disconnected from one's true status and behavior.

Kremlin diplomacy was also guided by a distorted perception of the original *détente*. It refrained from exploring whether *détente* was perhaps not a product of apocryphal predispositions of one U.S. party, as the Moscow establishment nostalgically thinks of *détente* as a product of Republican administrations, but of specific historical contingencies, including strategic parity between the superpowers, as well as the Vietnam war, upheavals in the West and the East, and the potential breakdown of the international order in the late 1960s-early 1970s.

This picture of cognitive defeat is, however, not the whole story. The apparent equanimity of the Kremlin's official response to its recent diplomatic setbacks was not merely a face-saving exercise. Within the framework of its mindset, as outlined above, there are other strategically important goals that it believes to be achieving. In particular, by imposing itself on the West as a sort of unavoidable ally in the struggle against terrorism and containment of "rogue states", it aspires to produce profound shifts in the political, psychological and cultural complexion of the international community, which would in turn strengthen the international and domestic legitimacy of Russia's present order. The key to this change is spreading the culture of emergency and struggle for survival that would permanently devalue civil and human rights and

increase the international demand for the Kremlin's paramount commodity - protection, mediation, and intelligence-sharing in an increasingly antagonistic world. This, however, is the topic of another paper.

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