

Personal factor in Russian-American relations¹

Traditionally, the relationships between Russia and the US have a certain psychological pattern, embodied in mutual great expectations at the beginning of presidency in both countries, accompanied by cooling in relations, finishing with total antagonism between the states and its' leaders. There are quite a lot of factors, which can improve or worsen the situation: starting from instantaneous establishment opposition, finishing with traditional Russophobia and anti-Americanism. Policy environment and advisory groups also affect political strategies, and determine decisions of the leaders in domestic and foreign policy. However, personal features, perception of each other and leadership style² seem most important factors when it comes to the relations between two presidents. Based on those assumptions, we will try to evaluate Russian – American relations in the recent decade, through personal factors of the two leaders and make some forecasts for the Trump-Putin period.

Typical dimensions of the personal factor

Policy environment comprises: electoral cycles, political climate in the country, and advisory groups of the president. It is always influenced by foreign policy and vice versa. These factors are tightly bound to psychological ones, which are of great importance when it comes to personal relations between two leaders. They are: images, emotions, beliefs, analogies, cognitive consistency, leader's personality, leadership style.

Under images we would understand mental representations that our mind uses to categorize something or someone. Very often image becomes a stereotype in our heads. Emotions should be distinguished from general understanding of mood or other feelings. They always consist of thoughts, experience, motivations and sensations. They usually affect cognitive abilities of the person depending on the emotionally loaded or neutral situation, and can seriously influence bilateral relations. Beliefs are responsible for interpretation and understanding of the facts by the leaders. They can shape and even block out the incoming information flow and seriously affect the perception of the situation or a person. Analogies are a cognitive shortcut – tool with which a person can save time by choosing not from all the options in the world, but from those he thinks valuable. In case of analogies, one is more predisposed to act according to the previous experience, if the circumstances seem similar. Cognitive consistency is the most vivid example of perception and misperception of a person, who can understate or exaggerate information depending on its consistency with his images and beliefs. Leader's personality mostly depends on his background: childhood, education, early work experience etc. Leadership style is connected to the psychological features of a person and applied to his advisory group. In general it shows how exactly the president rules i.e. percept information, makes political decisions, to what extent he listens to the inner circle of his aids, how he reacts on social environment impulses like stress, risk, constraints of different type etc. Depending on the leadership style one can figure out how much does advisory group mean for president, consequently, how much they are posed to groupthink in the decision making process and to

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² Hereinafter the typology of M. Hermann is used, see e.g. Hermann M. G. and Preston T. Presidents and Their Advisers Leadership Style, Advisory Systems and Foreign Policymaking // Eugene R. The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy Insight and Evidence, 2nd ed. Wittkopf (ed.), New York, St Matrin's, 1994.

what extent the presidency can be closed for new people and new information flows. Strong advisory groups can shape foreign and domestic policy primarily by helping set the agenda showing one piece of information and hiding another, interpreting it in the way it would be useful for the group of interests, making the president fully rely on certain advisors.

Obama – Medvedev (2009 - 2012)

Since Soviet Union collapse in 1991 decision makers both in Russia and the US went through all psychological phases of mutual perception. Emotional – during president Yeltsin era, great expectations and beliefs - during Putin early term, analogies with Soviet Union ambitions during his 2nd term, desire to understand Putin's leadership style of late.

In 2008-2009, just before the end of presidential terms in Russia and in the United States, another relationship cycle came to the end, marked by 'five-day war' with Georgia – Russian peacekeeping operation in South Ossetia, during which Moscow was accused of being aggressive towards Georgia, and Washington was accused of interfering in Russian domestic affairs. Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe and BMD (ballistic missile defence), NATO's eastward enlargement, arms trade with Venezuela - were also a stumbling block. Thus when 'Reset' policy was announced it raised hopes on both sides. Two new presidents came to power and their relationship could have revived or killed the initiative.

Regarding personal factor at that period, President Obama was more context-driven leader, i.e. he was not closed for the upcoming information flows and was able to readjust his tasks due to the new circumstances. He had an actively independent leadership style - was open to new information and challenged political constraints, though, during his early presidency, he tried to show them respect amid Congressional stall drive. He was a charismatic leader, whose motivation for action was relationships - by that means he urged other people to act. Barack Obama was a cognitively complex leader – he was attentive to the context of the decision (policy environment and position of his advisory group on the one hand and political experience on the other hand). He could have been called 'navigator' - leader who represents a kind of alert president, open to other opinions, if only the political environment had not been so harsh to him. By the end of his second term he drove to 'sentinel' pattern – low on information seeking, but high on interest in foreign policy issues.

Characterizing Dmitriy Medvedev's leadership style would be a sophisticated problem due to the specific nature of his presidency - he in fact changed places with Vladimir Putin only to make a third presidential term possible for the latter. One can assume that his style was closer to 'accommodative opportunist' – respectful for political constraints and open to information consensus-seeker. Nevertheless, we can certainly say that surprisingly it was easier for Obama and Medvedev to find common ground at that period. The most optimistic seemed the signing of START-III (Treaty on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms) in 2010 and unmilitary cargo transit to Afghanistan through Russian territory, which Moscow allowed to NATO. US and Russia cooperated in fighting against terrorism and drug trafficking, US opened the market for Russian atomic energy companies in 2011, Moscow launched negotiations on WTO membership, cooperated in cultural, educational and migration issues. It all ended there together with another electoral cycle in both countries, which came almost simultaneously with

the Syrian crisis. Last attempt for Moscow and Washington to cooperate was WMD elimination in Syria.

Obama – Putin (2012 - 2016)

To understand why both presidents fall into total dislike and rejection, it would be helpful to speculate about Vladimir Putin's leadership style, which leans toward autocratic. But it would be a mistake to say, like many journalists do, that there is only one person in Russia, who makes politics. Unlike with D. Medvedev one can distinguish features, which are helpful in understanding the decision-making process in Russia during Vladimir Putin's terms, but to be objective, one should always pay attention to political environment and a circle of advisors of the president.

Vladimir Putin represents a goal-oriented type of leader, which usually means that a style bears traits of individualism, and a person rarely enters any international or domestic coalitions. In challenging political constraints such leaders do not often consult their advisory group or seek for new information sources, hence they are prone to armed conflicts involvement, more than their context-focused counterparts. It all based on cognitive consistency and a researcher has to be familiar with the background of such leader to evaluate his character correctly. With such a type, paradoxically, the written above dimensions, like images, emotions, beliefs, analogies etc. are much more important, as he is not bounded by legislatures, press, polls, opposition, lobbies or any other political constraint in the way his colleagues are. A leader of such a type usually uses information to influence others. So Vladimir Putin is a 'crusader expansionist' by type, which means not only he is generally closed for new opinions and ignorant to political environment, but also motivated by problem-solving, not relationships, so he does not need to specifically track and talk round any opposition. Such features explain why Russian leader is much more risk-appeal, then, for instance his American colleague was, and why Obama and Putin could have never come to any consensus - not only because of different background, education and experiences, but also because of different psychological traits.

Not surprisingly, Russia and the United States faced such turbulences during their presidency tandem as: Ukrainian crisis, Syrian crisis escalation, sanction policy towards Russian Federation, curtailing co-operation and diminishing the minor effort, which were gained since 1991. It was the end of 'Reset' policy, which aim was to normalize Russian-American relations after conflict in Caucasus, moreover, it worsened them deeply, especially after US applied sanctions on ordinary citizens. It was done without any understanding of psychological background of Russians, most of who still believe in irresistible antagonism with the United States, thus the more harsh policy Washington uses, the more domestic support Russian president gets.

Trump – Putin (2017 - nowadays) – vague hopes for normalization

With Donald Trump, coming into White House in January 2017, both sides got to 'frozen balances', with the help of expert community, struggling to get back to normality in growing global disorder. Putin's leadership style is closer to those of George W. Bush's and to Donald Trump's. Both presidents rule the country as an enterprise, are dependent from their advisory groups, but value loyalty more than common sense. It gives one a vague hope that Russia and the US will come to a touch point, amid the absence of political will. However, we

should be especially accurate with estimations here, as D. Trump is much closer to his predecessor by psychological traits than it is usually said.

Being a non-systemic politician, Donald Trump raises a scientific question, whether he can actually be evaluated using traditional methods of leadership style measurement. If yes, how exactly to determine style if the president has not served yet? And if we take into analysis his numerous speeches, will that be statistically verified, taking into account his eccentricity and unconventional business background?

Having all those concerns in mind, we will try to speculate upon President Trump's leadership style and what does it mean for Russian-American relationships. Trump is a task-oriented leader, more than context driven, he is not prone to adapt to political circumstances just as in domestic politics so too in foreign affairs, he does not need any coalitions to bring his decisions into action either. He appreciates loyalty in his advisory groups; however, he is sensitive to domestic politics constraints and that might affect foreign policy. Though goal oriented people are less open to new information, with Trump we can also see the features of context driven leader, who is seeking new sources, and moreover, uses them widely in his work. Donald Trump is active, positive, charismatic – his motivation is to mobilize large groups of people. Regarding his relations with the advisory group and previous political experience, Trump shows signs of 'director-sentinel' type – when a leader prefers to directly control centralized in his inner circle decision making process, expresses modest need for information, only to back up his point of view, and has general interest in foreign policy.

Summarizing those traits, it is possible with great probability to call him an 'actively independent' type, who challenges political constraints, but remains open to opinions, maintaining maneuverability. In those features he is closer to Barak Obama of the 2nd term, rather than to Vladimir Putin. If American establishment stop fighting him constantly, it may turn his presidency into far more American-interests-oriented policy than of his predecessor. If on the contrary, the establishment and to certain extent US society remain intolerable and offensive to their president-elect, it might push his ambitions into foreign politics sphere (just as it happened to Obama), where, their mutual attraction with Vladimir Putin may finally play a role.

Unlike Obama, who was an antagonist to the Russian president, Trump may become a reliable ally, who, like G. W. Bush is more easy-to-understand, because of his business-like and strategic approach. It might help to regain cooperation in traditional spheres such as: counter terrorism and counterdrug initiatives, WMD non-proliferation, but also to find common ground in new scope of engagement: cultural, ecological, scientific, agricultural, development aid, perhaps even economic. First and foremost, it would be useful to demonstrate political will on both sides. Secondly, stop absurd offenses (like accusations that Russia influenced the results of US president elections or that United States want to destroy Russia, using sanctions). After the hysteria calms down, to come up with certain proposals, which we, expert community, should be ready to produce.