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**The Lobster, The Eagle
and The Bear**

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During the Cold War, few events engendered more nervousness amongst foreign policy professionals than a US-Soviet summit. Despite all that has changed in the world since the Cold War supposedly ended, a lot of that nervousness survives. In the United States, there is a narrative that explains it, and it goes something like this. First, State Department diplomats and officials have learnt to see their country as others see it. But American presidents believe they embody their country's values and are slow to learn why other countries do not always share them. Second, American presidents are, above all else, politicians—and very confident politicians at that. The professional, not to say bureaucrat, wants things planned and prepared. The politician wants to move ahead. The expert might think that he understands countries, but the politician is convinced that he understands people. The expert knows that his president is negotiating with the Russian system and not just the Russian president. His president is convinced that people make history. Conclusion: summits risk luring presidents into traps, derailing sound policy and damaging national interests.

The narrative is largely a myth. First, amateurism is not a peculiarly American shortcoming. It was an all too recurrent theme of British foreign policy between the world wars and did enormous damage to Britain's image and interests. Second, not all American presidents behave like amateurs, and not all of their officials display foresight. Truman and Eisenhower did not walk into traps. Nixon and his pre-eminent adviser, Henry Kissinger, opposed the State Department bureaucracy at every turn, but they approached the USSR (and China) as hardened professionals and secured strategic gains in the midst of their country's first defeat in war. Reagan defied bureaucratic wisdom to spectacular success. George Bush Sr was guided by bureaucratic wisdom, but he also invested heavily in personal diplomacy, and deserves much of the credit for bringing the Cold War to a soft landing and the division of Europe to an end. And whilst Bush's so-called 'Chicken Kyiv' speech nearly wrecked the American relationship with independent Ukraine before it even began, his apprehensions about the collapse of the USSR were reinforced by his closest professional advisers.

Nevertheless, like many other myths, the myth of the dangers of summitry is based on large elements of truth. In half of Europe, 'Yalta' is synonymous with those dangers. The impression made by Kennedy upon Khrushchev in Vienna helped persuade the latter that he could, with impunity, erect the Berlin Wall and deploy missiles in Cuba. Even Reagan, the 'Rambo president', was lured into an impromptu summit by Gorbachev at Reykjavik, where, to the alarm of his Secretary of State, he came close to committing the United States to comprehensive nuclear disarmament.

George Bush Jr's relationship with Putin has revived the myth, not to say fear, that a gullible American president will be outmanoeuvred by his wily Russian counterpart. It has also revived a congenital Ukrainian fear: that during such summits, American presidents will be lured into doing deals at Ukraine's expense. When Bush called Putin 'straightforward and trustworthy' and 'looked into his soul'

in 2001, he unnerved not only Ukrainians, but his own administration and a large part of the world. But when he uttered almost the same words in Kennebunkport six years later, who was unnerved? Almost no one. And why? Because when it comes to the issues which make the Kremlin most indignant towards Washington—NATO enlargement, the NATO and US relationships with Ukraine and Georgia, missile defence, and the linkage between ratification of CFE and fulfilment of Russia's OSCE Istanbul commitments—Bush has given away nothing. It is hard to be outmanoeuvred when you refuse to move.

The last supper

The so-called 'lobster summit' was a necessary but unimportant summit. It was necessary for three reasons. First, both presidents are scheduled to leave office—the fact that Putin might not observe the schedule is, from this point of view, irrelevant—and this, realistically speaking, is their last opportunity to conduct a comprehensive review of relations. Second, relations are bad, and whilst there are reasons for them to remain bad, it is obvious that they should not get out of control. Both sides have a need to ensure that, whatever the level of political rivalry and public anger, the back channels operate without impediment or distortion.

Third, the US-Russia relationship is still an indispensable relationship. Whilst Russian influence has grown since Putin took office and US influence has declined, the Kremlin knows that the United States remains the one country whose power and interests are felt in every corner of the world. Whilst the US now has more important issues to worry about than Russia, Russia impinges on almost every one of them: Iran, Syria, Hizbulah, Afghanistan, China, the enlarged NATO and, of course, energy supply and security. Whilst the US-Russia relationship is no longer the axis of world politics, for the countries of the former Soviet Union, the Black Sea and Caspian regions, and for NATO allies, it plays an instrumental role in defining the art of the possible. There is a long tradition behind this relationship, and, despite all of its tensions and problematic features, there is an inherited repository of knowledge and set of disciplines that sustains it. This is not true of either country's relationship with China, which both find less comprehensible and more unpredictable than they are prepared to admit. It certainly is not true of those who frighten the United States even more than they threaten it: Iran and the world's *jihadists*, with whom, in truth, there is no relationship at all. As collaborators, the problems faced by the United States and Russia appreciably diminish. As rivals, nearly every interface sharpens.

For all of this, the summit was unimportant for two reasons. The more pleasant reason is that no one planned to accomplish anything of importance there. That does not mean that it was free of agendas and gambits. Putin wants to derail Bush's missile defence programme in Europe. To this end, he is doing what he does best, playing 'bad cop' and 'good cop' at the same time. As bad cop (in Russia) he threatens to retarget missiles and withdraw from the INF Treaty. As good cop (at the G8) he proposes the Qabala initiative and (at Kennebunkport) the hitherto unthinkable: a regional defence initiative under the aegis of the NATO-Russia Council. Then, as a reminder of what is at stake, another bad cop, Sergey Ivanov, threatens to deploy Iskander operational-tactical missiles in Kaliningrad Oblast' if these 'historic and innovative' initiatives are not accepted. Putin knows that this combination of initiatives and threats—which took all of NATO by surprise—will not persuade Bush to derail the programme. Yet if, through the NATO-Russia Council, he can set up a process that delays it, then it might be technically and politically feasible for his Democratic successor to kill it. Of course, Bush will have none of it,

and he said as much in his one tart comment at an otherwise poignant farewell press conference. But now that Putin has proposed an ostensible solution—through the reviled NATO, no less—the Democrat controlled Congress might try to cut funding before a Democratic president is installed. Will technical arguments about X-band radars and mid-course interceptors really prevail? Perhaps, but the fate of the programme seems less certain than it did a few weeks ago.

For his part, Bush wants Putin's backing for sanctions against Iran that are effective rather than cosmetic. His bait appears to be the so-called '123' civil nuclear reactor agreement. It is not a trivial matter. Russia has set its sights on a 25 per cent share of this lucrative export market. But unless it complies with US safety standards—and, in practice, cooperates with US firms—it will not gain access to most of it. Perhaps the terms of such a trade were discussed, and perhaps not. Perhaps a tougher stance on Iran will only emerge when Putin is sufficiently frightened by the pace of Iran's nuclear programme and even more frightened by the actions it could provoke. But perhaps, despite all his outward decisiveness, Putin is less at liberty to make a decision about Iran than his American interlocutors suppose.

That possibility suggests a second and less pleasant reason why the summit was unimportant. The dynamics of the relationship are poorly understood by both sides. Until that changes, *no* summit can be important.

The attention deficit

The United States has policies about issues that involve Russia. But it does not have a policy for Russia.

The first reason for this is that the United States is preoccupied by problems that are sharper, more diffuse and more unsettling than Russia. The 'war on terror' (or, as it has become, the 'long war') is sharper, because whilst Russia is a problem, it is not an enemy. The irreconcilable enemies Wahhabist and Salafist jihadists, pose a civilisational threat and intend to pose it. The problem is more diffuse because these enemies are not states and because the ideologists of the Bush administration have defined them permissively, extravagantly and in ways which have only swelled their sympathisers and ranks. The problems, finally, are unsettling, because everyone who is honest with himself knows that this administration is barely managing to contain them. In the aftermath of the events of 9/11 few in Russia, let alone Europe, forecast that the United States would end up failing, and I, for one, was not one of the prescient few. But I did forecast that the 'war on terror' could 'become a cataract obscuring sight' and make policy makers forget that, 'a superpower, by definition, has many vital interests, and not just one'. Whilst the United States has not abandoned its priorities in the former Soviet Union, it is suffering from attention deficit disorder. As a case in point, energy security is once again a major security priority for the United States. But the highest ranking official with direct and detailed involvement in the issue in the Black Sea/Caspian region is an Assistant Secretary of State. In the Kremlin, the highest ranking official with direct and detailed involvement is President Putin himself.

The second reason for the absence of policy is that, in this atmosphere, few have the time to think objectively about where Russia is going and why. Some home truths need to be faced. For one thing, the US-Russia 'partnership' whose passing the United States laments, was forged at a time of Russian disorientation and weakness. It is not a model that a strong and self-confident Russia will return to.

Moreover, Russia is no longer seeking to join the West, and its internal affairs are no longer deemed a legitimate subject of discussion. American criticism of Russia's 'retreat from democracy'—at a time when Russia is recovering, when incomes are growing and pensions paid—persuades even ordinary people that Americans simply prefer Russia's weakness to its strength. It also diminishes US and Western credibility where they are needed most: in questioning and, where necessary, opposing Russia's *external* policy with regard to neighbours, energy security and arms control. Finally, the Kremlin will use every apparent transgression and double standard of the United States to enhance national confidence, not to say anger. This is because, despite its startling advances, Russia is a raw materials economy with post-industrial competitors and a country with institutional debilities and demographic imbalances that the Kremlin seems neither willing nor able to face.

Finally, the time for policy-making by President Bush and his team has passed. The eyes of the country are increasingly focused on the changing of the guard at the White House. Even if we knew today that the next US President would be a Democrat, our uncertainties would begin rather than end. Will he or she conduct a sober and objective audit of the past eight years, a systematic review of priorities and interests and an unflinching assessment of how means are to be matched to ends? Or will the new President, like some previous ones, confuse rhetoric with policy, process with substance and try to undo what cannot be undone? In the rush to withdraw from Iraq, America's 'second Vietnam', will the new administration rediscover a key lesson of the first Vietnam: that the damage done by the manner of America's exit was at least as bad as that done by its engagement? And if the new President is obliged to relearn this lesson, how much time will there be for Russia then?

Russia: from bad to worse?

Russia has an orientation and a methodology for dealing with the United States and with the West as a whole. But does it have a strategy, let alone a good strategy?

Russia's orientation for dealing with the United States, as with the outside world generally, has become emphatically unideological and 'pragmatic': motivated by 'the strict promotion of Russian national interests' in cooperation with any country—be it liberal, authoritarian or despotic—which can advance these interests. In other words, it is a policy of classic *Realpolitik*: a *pre-Cold War* policy based on balances of power, great power prerogatives, 'zones of influence' and geopolitics. This policy has enhanced Russia's influence, but in the West and former Soviet 'space', it has also lost friends. The emphasis on nation, state and power is less troublesome to the United States than it is to a European Union, which is committed (at least rhetorically) to 'moving beyond' these defining features of the modern world. Yet many American Democrats, in their attachment to post-modernism and soft power, are more like their allies in Europe than their Republican rivals at home. Will Russian *Realpolitik* reduce them to helplessness, or will it make them harder?

Russia's methodology at a tactical level is once again Leninist: manipulative, intelligence driven, dedicated to exploiting 'the slightest split between the enemies' and based on the premise that a 'conditional ally' in the enemy camp is far more valuable than an unconditional ally in one's own. But at a strategic level, its methodology is geo-economics: the use of economic levers for political as well as financial gain. Today, these levers exist, and they are in the hands of people who believe there is no point in having power unless it is used.

But does a strategic level methodology amount to a strategy? For there to be a strategy, there needs to be a goal. Today, there is little doubt that Russia has a wish list: recognition of Russia's primacy in former Soviet space, the energy 'Finlandisation' of Europe and international 'equality': a seat, *de facto* or *de jure*, at the top tables that are still defined as Western. Yet, as in Soviet times, one is obliged to ask whether the pursuit of one goal will make the pursuit of the others more difficult. As in Soviet times, one is also obliged to ask whether the means to achieve any of these goals are adequate. Then the means were largely military. Today they are largely economic. Those economic means appear impressive, today, not least because the West did not expect to encounter them. But if Russian energy deficits become the reality tomorrow, then how will they remain impressive without Western cooperation? And who is to guarantee that Russia will secure this cooperation without accepting Western standards and, to some degree, Western terms?

Who in Russia is now capable of answering these questions? Who is authorised to answer them? As the dynamics of the succession struggle unfold, these two questions become increasingly distinct. Russian analysts warn that the succession struggle could be extremely bitter, 'that all aspects of policy will be hostage to it', that the temptation to 'recruit the international factor' will be strong and that 'we should be prepared for all sorts of political conduct'. They seem to know what they are talking about. In the 'pre-crisis' period of *perestroika*, Gorbachev reminded the CPSU Central Committee that 'the question of power' is the 'fundamental question for any Communist'. So it is for Russia's post-Communists. It is not a good time for policy making, let alone repairing relationships.

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