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The "Personal Factor" in Soviet-American Summitry

Thirty years of Soviet-American summitry were brought to life by the former interpreter for Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mikhail Gorbachev, at the Harriman Institute on November 15, 1990. Ambassador Viktor Sukhodrev's career as an interpreter spanned the tenures of five Soviet general secretaries and seven American presidents. From his rare vantage point in the Soviet foreign affairs establishment, Ambassador Sukhodrev explained the importance of the "personal factor" in summitteering, its role in the successes and failures of past summits, and its promise for future ones.

In Sukhodrev's view, the personal factor, or the personal relationship developed between two leaders, is crucial "at meetings where the stakes are so high, and at times when the very destiny of the world is likely to be affected." Sukhodrev described a summit atmosphere that, despite "meticulous and voluminous" preparation, is frequently influenced by the accidental mixing of different personalities, unanticipated events, and unusual locales. Individual idiosyncracies and even the condition of a leader's health often assume an important role in determining the success or failure of a summit.

Interpreting for Khrushchev

Sukhodrev's first opportunity to see the importance of the personal factor in summitry came in 1959, with Khrushchev's famous visit to the United States and his meetings with President Eisenhower. According to Sukhodrev, the two leaders "got along very well. They had some similarities. They were both very direct and forthright." Khrushchev also had a great personal admiration for Eisenhower because of his role in World War II. Unfortunately, the promise their personal relationship held for the greater Soviet-American relationship came to naught because of one of those historical accidents, the U2 affair in 1960, and Khrushchev's belief that Eisenhower had betrayed him.

Khrushchev's use of idiomatic expressions in his own personal and private way added to the difficulty of interpreting for him. Upon seeing the "beautiful houses and well dressed

people" while traveling through California in the company of Henry Cabot Lodge, Khrushchev used the phrase *kuskina mat'*, which roughly translated means "we'll give you hell." Seeing Lodge's reaction to the translation, Khrushchev said to Sukhodrev, "I'm sure you've got it wrong again."

Sizing Up the Opposite Number

In June 1961 Sukhodrev attended the rather disastrous Khrushchev-Kennedy summit. Both a generation gap and a personality gap separated the two leaders. For instance, a remark by Khrushchev about Kennedy being the same age as Khrushchev's son who had been killed during the war unintentionally "nettled Kennedy." Unfortunately, it was Khrushchev's habit to come up with such remarks, which were often misunderstood. Yet another problem was "Khrushchev's rather disorganized mentality." At the 1961 summit, Khrushchev "had no papers in front of him at all. He just talked off the cuff on any subject that came to mind."

While the success or failure of a summit is often determined on the spot, Sukhodrev noted that the leaders' sizing up of their opposite number at personal meetings has longer lasting consequences. After the 1961 summit it was clear that "Khrushchev underrated Kennedy . . . both his determination and his strength. That gave rise to some rather unfortunate developments in the coming months," culminating in the Cuban missile crisis.

Summits on Hunting Towers

The three Brezhnev-Nixon meetings (Moscow 1972; Washington and Casa Pacifica, 1973; Moscow and Yalta, 1974) institutionalized and regularized the summit process. Much like Khrushchev, "Brezhnev had a yen for personal contact. The personal factor for him played a very important role." During a Kissinger visit to Moscow, Brezhnev invited Kissinger to Zavidovo, his dacha ninety miles outside of Moscow. Instead of having the regularly scheduled meeting



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indoors, Brezhnev decided to conduct the meeting outside. As Sukhodrev relates the story, "one of the most important discussions during that meeting was atop a ten-foot hunting tower in between shooting for wild boar . . . the subject was China . . . and Kissinger was in hunting attire, in Soviet army boots and military style jacket that had been provided for him."

By the mid-seventies, the vagaries of age and Brezhnev's health reduced the importance of the personal factor in summit talks. Brezhnev was no longer strong enough to take the initiative on important matters. During the Brezhnev-Carter summit in Vienna, June 1979, "Brezhnev couldn't do any negotiating. There was no personal factor. . . Brezhnev could only read." However, "for the sake of the Soviet public mostly, there was a one-on-one meeting, because that was supposed to prove to the Soviet public that Brezhnev was alive and well, and able to hold his own in a one-on-one conversation."

A Different Ballgame

The Gorbachev period produces "a totally different ballgame in summiteering." While during the Brezhnev period the Soviets were saddled with an old, infirm leader unable to engage in vigorous negotiations, during the Reagan-Gorbachev period, "the tables were turned because of Reagan with his cue cards." In contrast to Reagan, Gorbachev only uses briefing papers for numbers. Gorbachev is also the first Soviet leader to be involved with the actual planning and elaboration of the Soviet position on such things as strategic arms. Especially impressive has been Shevardnadze's growth into his role as foreign minister. With no experience in international affairs prior to his appointment as foreign minister, Sukhodrev said that, "It is one of those miracles how a person like Shevardnadze could, in just a few years, become definitely one of the best experts on foreign policy in today's world, able to, in a very friendly way, discuss all of the intricacies of any issue under the sun." While

Gorbachev did not appreciate its importance at first, he is "beginning to understand the importance of the 'personal relationship' in his contacts with foreign leaders." Though not yet apparent with American presidents, it shows through in his relationship with other leaders, notably German Chancellor Helmut Kohl; for instance, on Gorbachev's suggestion the two of them visited Gorbachev's birthplace in Stavropol'. "Gorbachev is beginning to understand the virtues of serious discussions outside of serious circumstances, outside the office, tieless, coatless." In a general way, however, the evolution in Gorbachev's approach to dealing with foreign leaders is indicative of the problems Soviet society faces in opening up to the outside world. In Gorbachev's own case "It took him sometime, because there's this uptightness of all Soviet leaders, built up over decades of prudish Soviet leadership, uptight about anything, afraid to let their hair down for a moment. A feeling that permeated the entire society in a way."

Sukhodrev sees great promise for Soviet-American relations in the near future, in part due to the chemistry between Gorbachev and Bush. In Sukhodrev's opinion, the Gorbachev-Bush relationship is "as close to ideal in terms of a personal relationship in the overall Soviet-American relationship as you can get . . . they are basically the same age . . . In a way, they have the same kind of outlook . . . It makes sense for these two people to talk to each other, because they both know their business."

As for the role of an interpreter in the summit process, Sukhodrev noted that it is much more than that of a "technician," for the job is "not just to convey the words, but the spirit and the emotions" of a statement. He found the role of an interpreter peculiar, partly because he is a necessary evil in what are supposed to be one-on-one conversations. A close relationship often develops between the interpreter and the principal on official visits because the interpreter is "the first compatriot the principal turns to, simply because there is no one else in the room."

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