Summit Diplomacy: Mission Unaccomplished (Background Thoughts for Session One, Fall 2019)

Before I begin this backgrounder, let me note that I have taken much of its content, at least in regard to the presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush from Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott’s *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War*. In several places you will see page references; unless explained, they are from this volume. I have also used other sources, but since this is not an exercise in footnoted scholarship—thank heavens!—I will spare you from detail.

May I also add that before we launch into the Bush and Clinton years, I will briefly summarize what we did last spring, since a considerable amount of time has elapsed since then. For many of you, this will hopefully be a helpful refresher; for a few, this may help orient you to material that is now new to you.

As we saw previously, American presidents began engaging in what we might call summit diplomacy early in the twentieth century. Theodore Roosevelt actually helped organize one such meeting in 1905 to conclude the Russo-Japanese war, but it was Woodrow Wilson at the extended and bitterly controversial Versailles Peace Conference ending World War I who really pioneered in summit diplomacy.

In many ways, however, Franklin Roosevelt set many of the parameters of summit conferences during World War II, especially meeting with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin (and occasionally with others like China’s Chiang Kaishek). That tradition continued during the Cold War, and Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan all tried their hands at this top-level diplomacy. The most common counterpart was the Soviet Union, although other nations like China, Israel, and Egypt began claiming attention, too. Arms limitation proved a continued focus, but in a more general sense the pursuit of preserving the peace was an uppermost aim.

Virtually all presidents studied hard for these summits, surrounding themselves with key, experienced, and knowledgeable advisors. Domestic political considerations were never absent from these endeavors, but presidents also aimed at achieving broader goals within an international context. Some succeeded, others failed. All assumed that the force of their personalities could make a difference. Often it did, but unless adequate preparations had been completed and policies reflected broader national interests, they seldom made lasting differences.

We ended in the spring with the Reagan administration, eight years that saw two very different tones by a president not well-schooled in international politics. (On the other hand, even if not engaged in fine-tuning agreements, he took seriously his role, especially in his second term.) Reagan’s first administration tended to be hawkish in a Cold War sense, and his rhetoric cast the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” His second term, however, proved different. One factor was the influence of the First Lady, who sensed that there had been a lack of movement on diplomatic issues in the early years and that her husband’s place in history might be harshly judged by this fact. Even more important was a new leader in the Soviet Union: Mikhail Gorbachev, who sought to change national policies, both within the Soviet Union and outside its borders.

In continuing our examination of presidential summits, we will place particular emphasis in session one on the term of George H. W. Bush. This is not only because he immersed himself in international diplomacy more than many other presidents, but primarily because his years coincided with stunning and significant events in the world: the end of the Cold War. Events between 1989-1993 often moved rapidly, and they frequently overwhelmed policy deliberations. And despite the positive ways in which Gorbachev’s earlier emergence had given hope to Ronald Reagan’s second term, the Soviet leader proved far less satisfactory for Bush’s four years.

Actually, George Bush the elder was a bit of a surprise, especially at the start of his term. We would come to know him as an internationalist skilled at building, maintaining, and using international coalitions, but at the beginning of his administration he seemed terribly reluctant to engage in summit diplomacy. In contrast to Gorbachev’s dynamic and creative posture, Bush was much criticized for timidity and caution.

Bush’s hesitation masked what you might call a stealth diplomat. Even while vice president, he had confided in Gorbachev that he intended to run for the White House and would have to make hawkish statements during the campaign to appease the right-wing of his party. If he won, however, he declared that he aimed to work to improve relations with the Soviet Union. Gorbachev signaled his understanding and often referred to this conversation in later policy deliberations at home.

Once elected, however, Bush and key advisers seemed unsure of the Soviet leader’s sincerity, and they calculated that presidents who had acted hastily—like JFK in his early meeting with Khrushchev—had usually gotten in trouble. Advisers feared Gorbachev was a worthier opponent because he was smooth, skilled, articulate, and persuasive. He knew public relations, and he was a charmer. That might make him more dangerous than the old Khrushchev bluster. Once elected, therefore, Bush retreated to an initial period of caution and inaction.Thus, the Bush years did not get off to a good start insofar as summitry was concerned. Gradually, however, the Bush administration and the president himself began to see that Gorbachev was indeed embarked on a new set of policies and determined not to retreat

Aiding in bringing about Bush’s first summit with Gorbachev was the increasingly warm and trusting relationship between Secretary of State Jim Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. The Soviet official had already shown openness during the Reagan years, but now Baker sought to develop the kind of mutual regard that had existed between Reagan’s Secretary of State, George Shultz, and Shevardnadze. Baker had recently bought a ranch in Wyoming, where he took Shevardnadze. They hiked, fly fished, and simply relaxed and shared experiences and ideas before getting down to serious talks. Out of this encounter came real empathy and even trust. Baker would say of the Soviet Foreign Minister: “Unlike so many diplomats, he can be influenced if you make a good argument. He’ll listen to it, he’ll make a hard decision, and later he’ll defend it at home with Gorbachev and the military.” (121)

A second reason for the first Bush-Gorbachev summit was a series of events along the western frontier of the Soviet Union with countries were in revolt. That action, in fact, seemed part of a global pattern. The year 1989 was a tumultuous one: less than five months after Bush became president, the Tiananmen episode erupted in China as Deng Xiaoping put down the democratic protestors in a bloody fashion. It shook US-Chinese relations, and it put into question much of the good will that the Chinese leader, Deng, had cultivated in the US.

Now, there was a new and concerning problem: the question of what might happen if there were such an uprising in one of the Eastern European satellites. Would the military and right-wing elements force Gorbachev to become the Soviet Deng? Or would he stand up to those forces and risk declining popularity and increasing criticism. That question remained a lively one throughout 1989 and 1990.

Actually, the wait was not long, for in the second half of 1989 it began happening in the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), in Hungary, in Poland, and most crucially in East Germany. Gorbachev’s decision not to send Soviet troops to put down these demonstrations and protests confirmed his sincerity but alarmed his opponents, and his popularity dropped.

Ever since the late 1960s, the doctrine of Leonid Brezhnev had seemed firmly in place. It promised Soviet intervention, should any of the satellite nations seek independence from Moscow. Now, one Soviet official told reporters that doctrine was dead and had been replaced by the Frank Sinatra Doctrine. Expressed simply in the words of one of Sinatra’s successful numbers: “I did it my way.” That was what was happening along the western fringes of the Soviet Union. Countries were doing it their way.

The Malta Summit, nicknamed the Seasick Summit, December 2-3, 1989, thus took place amidst rapid change in both politics and weather. Roughly a month earlier, the Berlin Wall had come down, and Germans were eager to pursue unification, a result which troubled the Soviets deeply. After all, a united Germany might become, as it had been in 1914 and 1939, an expansionist enemy which threatened the Soviet Union yet again. Not only was Gorbachev worried about this possibility, so was Bush. The American President wished to see unification proceed slowly and amidst potential checks on German ambition. Also troubling politicallly was the fact that Eastern European satellites were threatening to fly out of the Kremlin’s grasp at warp speed.

In terms of weather, Malta at the start of the summit experienced a terrible storm with high winds and rough seas, making the decision that each nation have a separate shipboard headquarters highly problematic. After a casual first meeting, Bush returned to his own ship, but the fierce weather prevented the Americans from returning later in the day for an opening banquet and more formal talks. Fortunately the winds subsided, and the conference could continue the next day. In the words of the authors of the best book on the conference, “With the entire world watching, the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union had traveled to a barren island in the middle of nowhere, only to risk being tossed into the ocean by sixteen-foot seas.(160.)

For his part, Bush, unlike presidents from Truman through Carter, had never read deeply or studied global politics carefully. Like all presidents since 1945, however, he patiently and thoroughly prepared for this summit, studying in detail twenty major topics that his national security adviser put before him. Tutorials were held in the Oval Office and at Camp David by government specialists, outside experts, and former officials. There was no doubting the president’s objective of a meaningful first encounter with his Soviet counterpart. This was a somewhat changed aim on the president’s part. Originally, he had seen the meeting as simply a get-acquainted event, but once the independence movements began gaining momentum in Eastern Europe and Germany, he realized that much was at stake at Malta. Meaningful results were needed.

There was also a shift in how Bush and his key advisers viewed Gorbachev. Originally as we have seen, the major question was whether the Soviet leader was more show than substance. In other words, was he merely a more skilled but still basically orthodox Marxist? By the time of Malta, the focus had changed. Now, the question was not Gorbachev’s sincerity but his durability; in short: could he stay in office and achieve his objectives? This introduced another, related question: how could the US help him succeed.

For his part, Gorbachev contended that the Soviets no longer considered the US an enemy. “Things have changed. We want you in Europe. You ought to be in Europe. . . . So don’t think we want you to leave.” The reason was obvious: with Eastern Europe falling apart, Western European nations by themselves would not be able to contain this disintegration, but an American presence might be a critical stabilizing factor.

The talks at Malta ended with the first formal joint press conference in the history of summits. The only one sharp difference between the two nations concerned Soviet behavior in the Western Hemisphere, specifically support for Cuba and Communists in Central America. Otherwise, the summit reaffirmed the idea that the leaders must—and could--trust in each other, showed the value of one-on-one personal contacts at the highest levels, and indicated that the US was willing to move toward agreements which would ease Gorbachev’s policies toward the Baltic countries and on German unification. Put another way: it seemed a successful enough meeting for Bush to gain in confidence and lessen his fears that he had to pander to the right-wing of his party.

For nearly the next two years, Bush fashioned his diplomacy on four principles: helping Gorbachev remain in power; keeping the Soviets on the “reform” track; making agreements favorable to the US, and conceding nothing which might injure the US, should Gorbachev fail and be replaced (which, of course, is what happened).

The extent of change on both sides was revealed in greater negotiating flexibility. Gorbachev was willing to allow East Germany—and other satellites—to declare their independence and to permit German unification. He no longer opposed the American military presence in Europe, and he even hinted he would allow a multi-party system in the USSR. For his part, Bush could entertain the possibility of limited Soviet intervention in the Baltic states—should that happen—and push for a united Germany to become part of NATO with no other country on the periphery of the USSR permitted into NATO.

The latter point, however, was a rallying cry for conservatives in the Soviet Union: a united Germany linked into the NATO alliance was perceived as a direct, immediate, overwhelming—and, above all, unacceptable--threat. It would not be forgotten by Gorbachev’s critics.

A second summit was the so-called Christmas in June Washington summit in 1990. With Gorbachev proving remarkably reasonable on Germany in particular, American diplomats looked for ways to reward him. An invitation to address Congress, agreements on chemical weapons and arms control, a commercial agreement—all these would bolster Gorbachev’s new policies as bringing beneficial results to and for Moscow. As we will see, however, not all of these items were still in play by the time the summit occurred.

By early 1990, it wasn’t Germany that was causing the major problems. It was Lithuania, followed closely by the other two Baltic states: Latvia and Estonia. Change was coming in dramatic and rapid fashion, perhaps too much so for Gorbachev and Bush, both of whom favored change in a measured, controlled environment. Once begun, however, the forces of change had their own tempo and scope. Dynamic events simply outpaced cautious diplomacy.

Bush was aware of the dangers. As Condoleezza Rice, not yet the important national security advisor she would become for Bush’s son, George, but still an administration figure noted: “He’s afraid to light a match in a gas filled room.” Bush put it another way, quoting Yogi Berra, then manager of the New York Mets. When asked “What happened to the Mets, Yogi,” Berra had answered, “Well, we made the wrong mistakes.” Bush wished to avoid those “wrong mistakes.”

So, critical to the Washington summit were still events on the periphery of the Soviet Union: in Eastern Europe and Germany. How far could the nations of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states stray from Moscow without facing military intervention? And how fast and far could German reunification proceed with the blessing—or at least the tolerance—of Moscow? Could Germany be reunited? Could a reunited Germany join NATO? Could a reunited Germany in NATO be armed against the USSR? These were difficult, maybe insoluble, questions.

Gorbachev was set to visit the US in late May; on May 4, Latvia declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Lithuania had already acted on March 11; Estonia was poised to act and would at a later date (August 1991). Another troublesome problem for the Soviet leader was the fact that in May, 1990, as he was flying to the US, Boris Yeltsin, the brash, boastful, and often-drunken Yeltsin, was elected president of Russia.

Gorbachev needed a commercial treaty with the US to help solve its economic problems, since economic reform was not producing positive results; in fact, Gorbachev’s reforms were floundering. Critical of those economic plans, Washington was reluctant to offer aid. Instead it wanted promises on restraint vis-à-vis the Baltic countries and Germany. The situation, difficult for Washington, was virtually impossible in Moscow.

Another serious and divisive issue was the Soviet policy on Jews wishing to exit the USSR. Soviet leaders resisted allowing large numbers to leave, primarily because these Jewish emigres were bound for Israel where they were being encouraged to create new and controversial settlements which threatened Arab lands. Thus, the Arabs were pressuring Moscow to hold back on emigration. Washington, however, was making it a condition for improving relations that Gorbachev allow more Jewish emigres. Again, the issue had wide and difficult implications, this time for the Middle East. Once Gorbachev came to Washington, Bush threatened to hold up any trade agreement until the Soviets passed an emigration law.

After several days in Washington in June, 1990, the Soviets and Americans agreed on a number of minor issues such as enhanced student exchanges, the peaceful use of atomic energy, a future international park on Alaskan and Siberian land, and limits on chemical weapons. Literally only at the last minute as Gorbachev and Bush stood in a nearby room preparing to face reporters in a final press conference did Bush agree to sign a commercial treaty. Gorbachev, who had pleaded for one, was relieved. (Bush added, though, that he wouldn’t submit the agreement to Congress or grant MFN [most-favored-nation] status until the Soviets acted on emigration and lifted their blockade on Lithuania.)

Thus, the second summit ended, after difficult days, in a spirit of cautious goodwill and hopefulness. At the end of the visit, the two leaders spent a short time at Camp David with more informal talks and exchanges. At one point Bush introduced Gorbachev to horseshoes, and the Soviet leader landed a ringer on his first throw. Bush then had that horseshoe mounted on a plague which he gave to Gorbachev, praising him for his skill and receiving Gorbachev’s hope that it would signal good luck.

Overall, Bush had repeated his support for *perestroika* but that support was more rhetorical than real. Still, it gave Gorbachev some public reason to return to Moscow with claims of having had a successful summit. That was even more important than ever, since Boris Yeltsin was now breathing down his neck, politically, at home.

In short, Gorbachev faced far greater challenges than ever: conservative critics, especially the military, hated his refusal to intervene in the German, East European, or Baltic situations. They also resented his willingness to reduce military forces and budgets. And now Yeltsin was lambasting him as being too cautious and traditional on economic questions. The vise was closing, and help from the West was slow and limited. The stage was set for the political demise of the Soviet leader and the eventual return of more nationalistic policies. Down the road this would bring Vladimir Putin to power.

The last months of 1990 and the very beginning of 1991 proved especially difficult for both sides, especially Gorbachev. Two issues were uppermost; one was new, and the other, continuing. The first, involving the Middle East, was how to respond to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. This was the number one question in international politics for the next five months. Bush skillfully marshalled a coalition of forces and prepared to take military action, if necessary. His aim, however, was to gain Soviet support for what was essentially an American policy with UN baclomg. This was only the second UN-sanctioned military action in history. The first, Korea in 1950, had lacked Soviet support since Moscow had been boycotting the UN. This was thus the first time since 1945 that Moscow acted alongside Washington militarily. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze—especially Shevardnadze-- were open to this support, though Gorbachev wanted more time and favored a diplomatic result, if possible.

The second issue, one that lingered and was familiar, was not in the Middle East (where the Soviets had failed after a decade in Afghanistan (December 1979-February 1989) but still in Eastern Europe (including Germany) and especially in the Baltic states where there were the increased efforts at achieving independence continued. Would Gorbachev really allow independence? If so, where? Only in East Germany? Basically in the East European satellites? Or also in the three Baltic states? If the answer was everywhere, this signaled the end of the Soviet Union. If the Soviets did intervene, belatedly but forcefully, in some—or all of these areas—was this not contradicting Gorbachev’s foreign policy of liberalism and restraint?

And how were these critical months from the late summer of 1990 to mid-winter, 1990-1991, going to affect a third proposed summit in February 1991? In other words, from the US perspective, how tolerant would Washington be of any return to hard-line policies?

To reiterate: this was a critical moment, one with long-term implications for Gorbachev’s future, for Soviet/Russian policies, and for relations between Moscow and Washington. Some scholars argue that if there was any one moment which ended the Cold War, it may well have been when Gorbachev accepted a reunited Germany within NATO. (238) “Despite Gorbachev’s repeated protestations that there were no winners or losers, he had capitulated on the single most troublesome and dangerous issue of the Cold War.” (239) To Soviet hard-liners, it was one of the most hated developments and would remain so for a very long time. Even Anatoly Dobrynin, the seasoned and moderate diplomat who had been ambassador to the US for more than two decades, believed that Gorbachev had conceded too much too easily.

Starting in the late summer of 1990, the American-led effort to dislodge Hussein’s Iraq from Kuwait meant acting carefully, especially with the Soviet Union. From Washington’s standpoint, it was reversing a forty-five-year policy of trying to keep the Soviets out of the Middle East. Now, the US was trying to lure them in. (262) As the months moved through the fall and winter of 1990-1991, the situation became increasingly difficult for Gorbachev whose enemies viewed joining US/UN efforts against Hussein as a show of weakness and subservience.

Politics had overtaken diplomacy in both Washington and Moscow; and events had overwhelmed policy. The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union were hailed in the US, of course, as the results of US diplomacy. Now that he faced a re-election campaign, Bush veered away from his careful support of Gorbachev and his policies and boldly claimed credit for ending the Cold War. The politician had trumped the diplomat.

We know, of course, that Bush failed to win another term, turning the White House over to a young, untested former governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. In at least one major respect, Clinton faced new problems. Gorbachev was out of power as of Christmas Day, 1991, badly discredited by his political opponents. Economic reforms were too modest and ineffectual; diplomatic ones seemed tied to retreat and defeat.

Diplomacy would now take on a different tone and direction. No figure could speak for the Soviet Union, for it had ceased to exist. Representing Russia was Boris Yeltsin, but he was mercurial at best, even when sober. And now a host of independent nations on the periphery of Russia vied for recognition and support. In short, novel challenges faced the new administration, which lacked a Gorbachev and Shevardnadze as cooperative counterparts.

Even though his background focused on the relatively poor and landlocked state of Arkansas, Clinton was fully aware of the wider world. As a student he had tasted a broad palate of courses at Georgetown University, where he received his B.A. before being named a Rhodes Scholar and studying at Oxford. Then, it was Yale Law. As governor of Arkansas, of course, his opportunities outside of Little Rock were limited, but once in the presidency, Clinton proved a most enthusiastic exponent of personal diplomacy: with Boris Yeltsin and dozens of others. Between the spring of 1993 and the fall of 2000, he made 133 visits to other nations, more than Ike, JFK, LBJ, and Nixon combined.

In the interests of brevity, however, we will focus on only a very few. Twice Clinton met at the summit with Boris Yeltson, once in Vancouver, Canada, in April 1993 and again in Helsinki, Finland, in March of 1997. At Vancouver, Clinton pledged support for Russian reforms, promising $1.6 billion in US support, primarily in food aid. This meant, among other things, credits for the Russians to purchase American farm crops, which was obviously helpful to American farmers. (This was the same spirit of engaged self-interest that had motivated the Marshall plan nearly a half century earlier.)

Before the two-day 1993 summit, however, Yeltsin gave a speech in which he gambled on continued popular support for himself as opposed to the more conservative legislative body, the Duma. To that end he called for a referendum in late April on his reform policies. Despite the advice of more cautious advisers who feared his being on the losing side of Yeltsin’s referendum, Clinton strongly supported the Russian leader. He also found, after roughly three months in office, that this policy was endorsed by key Democrats like Joe Biden and Republicans like Bob Dole and even Newt Gingrich. Gingrich would go on to become a chief antagonist in and after 1994, and Dole would oppose him in the election of 1996.

At this point, however, Clinton’s gamble largely worked. Yeltsin was strongly supported in the April 25 vote, Clinton had solid underwriting for his policy in the US, and the aid package, four times anything negotiated by the previous administration, provided food credits as well as housing for Soviet veterans returning home from Eastern Europe plus supporting the dismantling of nuclear weapons.

Four years later, at the Vancouver summit, the two men continued to get along well. Clinton later claimed that he liked Yeltsin and found him well-prepared and clear-eyed in his negotiations, and the result of this conference was stronger assistance than during the Bush years. Note, too, that it was done in the face of a poll showing 75% of the American people opposed aid to Russia.

This second Clinton-Yeltsin summit occurred soon after Clinton was inaugurated for a second term. By this time Republican opposition had grown substantially, especially in the senate, although it would be another ten months before the Monica Lewinsky scandal erupted. The impeachment process it triggered would dominate much of Clinton’s second term..

As for the second major US-Russian summit at Helsinki in March 1997, it was somewhat remarkable that it even took place. When it did, both of the major participants were recovering from serious surgeries. Yeltsin, who had also been re-elected after the first summit, was recovering from open-heart surgery. For Clinton, knee repair was the result of a fall only nine days before the summit began. The American President’s doctors opposed his participation so soon after his operation, but he went anyway, despite pain and the need for crutches.

A key reason for plodding on was the fact that NATO was about to vote on accepting or rejecting the entrance of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into membership, and the US and Russia needed to agree on how to handle this action. It was one thing, as Gorbachev had shown, for Moscow not to intervene in the decisions of these areas as they declared their independence. It was another for them to become members of NATO, of what had been a defensive wall against potential Soviet expansion ever since 1949.

The result of this second summit was generally positive. Despite Yeltsin’s reservations, he agreed with the expansion of NATO into countries formerly part of the Warsaw Pact, and Clinton agreed not to station troops or missiles in those countries and to work to include Russia in the G-7, thus making it a G-8. There were other elements, including limitations on missiles, but the Russian legislative body refused to go along with these restrictions.

Speaking of the G-8 introduces an element of summitry that had been growing since the G-6 was formed in 1975, but one we haven’t acknowledged. Since then it had grown to the G-7 (Canada in 1976) and then the G-8 (Russia in 1998). (Following the expulsion of Russia in 2014, it is again the G-7.) It meets annually and comprises another type of summit experience that has grown through the years as the number of regional or specialized international organizations has increased. We will look briefly at them in the final session.

As for the more traditional summit meetings, Clinton held one at Camp David in 2000 on Middle East peace prospects with the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, and Palestinian Authority chair, Yasser Arafat. It took place from July 11-25 and was an effort to build on Jimmy Carter’s Camp David Accords, then more than two decades old. Although these talks were extensive and covered key issues, the two sides failed to come to any agreements, despite Clinton’s continuing efforts in December and even January in the last days of his presidency to produce a document of jointly-supported principles.

January 20, 2001, would witness only the second time the son of a US president would enter the White House. Unlike his father, George W. Bush was not known for a rich and varied experience in national government or a particular interest in foreign affairs. But further consideration of summit diplomacy in the early twenty-first century, with George W. Bush, Barrack Obama, and Donald Trump, plus concluding observations on summits in general, will have to await our final session on October 9.

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