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With friends like these: foreign policy as personal relationship

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Governments are run by humans who have sympathies and moods. The study of leaders' personalities, albeit not widespread, is an important tool for foreign policy analysis. Plus, friendship is a feeling that decision-makers like to express for each other. This paper analyses the activity of Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's three times premier, who has made 'friendship' a central tenet of his personal foreign policy. Three cases are considered, namely, Berlusconi's relationship with George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin. The paper concludes that his friendship-based foreign policy has somehow worked; but, because he decided to ignore Italy's structural constraints in the international arena, he ended up wasting opportunities and resources.

Keywords: leaders' personality; Italy's foreign policy; George W. Bush; Tony Blair; Vladimir Putin

With friends like these

States are run by governments, which are run by human beings, who have sympathies and moods. From the schoolyard to international negotiating tables, from boardrooms to war rooms (Holl 2005), people often adjust their decisions depending on who they are confronted or bound with. To a considerable extent, presidents and premiers are no different. A centrality of the person is thus claimed as a crucial factor in political choice decision-making. On the one hand, assuming that identification is crucial in persuasion processes, the 'like-you/dislike-you' dichotomy does have an impact in politics and goes beyond ideological proximity or aloofness of policymakers.

At the ballot box, people tend to look for leaders, whether it be George W. Bush or Barak Obama in the United States, or Romano Prodi or Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, whose traits they rate as being most similar to their own (Caprara *et al.* 2007), or to their own idealized image.

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On the other hand, people, regardless of whether they are the mass public or political leaders, need embodiment of states in order to understand them (McGraw and Dolan 2007), otherwise meant as 'personification' of states. A state 'is conceptualized as a person', wrote Lakoff (1992, p. 465). With personification, sympathy or disgust naturally comes. Moreover, the 'state' is often personalized; and its leader's persona end up representing it.

In international politics, war and peace may not hinge on the personality of heads of governments, yet political leaders, with their personality traits, are the intervening variables of politics, facilitating dialogue and understanding or disapproval and hostility.[1] As Barash and Webel (2002, p. 209) point out, 'certain individuals, by the force of their personalities and the decisions they made, have enduring effects on history'. How much do similarities between leaders' personality traits effectively translate into cooperativeness, alliances or even friendship? How much can one's liking a fellow decision-maker alter the choices of a political leader? Does the 'likeableness' of its leaders translate into material gains for a country? May friendship between premiers change entrenched stereotypes of a population or help disregard the evident limits of a country's foreign policy? Answering such questions and assessing the impact of the 'intervening variables' is fundamental to appreciating international politics.

Wendt (1999) added a fourth 'national interest' to the more traditional physical survival, autonomy and economic well-being, namely self-esteem. Self-esteem is a basic need for human beings and one of the primary elements individuals search for when joining a group, be it a street gang, a sporting club, or the G7/G8. The basic mechanics are the same for a schoolboy and a mature statesman, but in the latter case the reverberating consequences may affect many people as well as entire states.

The question, however, is why should the study of political leaders, together with their personalities and their relationships, be more relevant now than it has been in the past? The reason is threefold. First, the end of the rigid, straightforward, bipolar structure of the Cold War has given way to a more complex and flexible multipolar world. In this world, the political leader as an agent comes to the fore more forcefully than in the past. Second, recently, in most countries, heads of state and premiers have increased their protagonism in foreign policy (Kaarbo 1997, Poguntke and Webb 2005, Pasquino 2005, Tallberg 2007). Summits of 'political CEOs' now abound, and there are few issues that are not affected by international politics. Third, media and digital communications now push the image of leaders into every household, while public opinion is constantly fed by information about the leaders' appearance and behaviour. Indeed, in terms of celebrity, some policymakers may even compete with movie stars. Furthermore, the pace of modern politics has set the conditions for a 'permanent' political campaign (Amadori 2002, Barisione 2006). Campaigning for the 2008 US presidential elections started in the autumn of 2006, with the mid-term elections. Although few voters cast their ballots with international politics in mind, foreign policy issues have great impact for the media and thus provide presidential candidates with opportunities 'to talk high politics'.

In a recent study on bargaining power in the European Councils, Tallberg (2007, p. 3) observes that '... structural power is central but can be mediated by factors such as the threat of the veto as well as by personal attributes of political leaders'. Certainly, the size of the EU country (or whether you are the United States, or Russia) represented by a given leader matters the most (*The Economist* 2007). But the personality of that leader can actually foster or hamper the structural power of that country, if he or she does not correctly appreciate the settings in which they act. A leader's personality is hence a 'multiplier', whether positive, negative or neutral, for a country's international standing.

In correspondence with the increased importance of political leaders, the world political scene has thus witnessed a growing manifestation of direct, friendly personal relationships in questions on foreign affairs. Less constrained by the 'institutionalized' dialogue of the Cold

War, political leaders, whether charismatic or simply populist, can now exercise their rhetoric and personal skills more effectively on their counterparts and, more importantly, on their counterparts' public. Psychology in general, and especially interpersonal psychology, has overbearingly invaded the field of international politics. Should one look for a 'laboratory country', Italy would certainly be a candidate, because of the informal, direct and histrionic style of its former premier, Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi, who enjoys a level of genuine, personal popularity never seen before in Italy, is convinced that good friendly relations can be a powerful tool in foreign affairs, 'to win' in international politics, exactly as he has done in domestic politics. He is seen, by his many admirers, as 'unpredictable', wanting to break 'old games' (Fisher and Povoledo 2008). Berlusconi is so self-confident that he truly believes he is the one who can change Italy's relative international profile.

Several articles assessing Silvio Berlusconi's foreign policy have been published. Some authors maintain that his government's foreign policy did mark discontinuity with the past (Frattini 2004, Romano 2006); some scholars (Andreatta and Brighi 2003, Croci 2005, Brighi 2006) contend that, all in all, little changed. This article, however, deviates from the 'continuity versus discontinuity' debate. We chose to concentrate on the individual (the first level of analysis) because we wanted to explore the impact that emphatic relationship (friendship) may have on leaders. Silvio Berlusconi twice became prime minister of a strongly consensus-based democracy and enjoyed a level of *personal* approval and support that had never been seen before in Italy.

In this explorative work, we focus on Berlusconi as an exemplar case to cast light on the importance of the personality of political leaders and on an emphatic kind of relationship, namely 'friendship', among powerful individuals. We analyse such relationships between Silvio Berlusconi and three world leaders, George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin (and their much heralded friendship), in the area of foreign policy. Referring to all three men, the Italian premier has repeatedly declared himself 'an ardent admirer of their policies' (Pasquino 2007, p. 51).

Accepting structural (Tallberg 2007) as well as societal milieu (Hudson 2005) constraints, we argue that Berlusconi's personality did affect Italy's structural power. Contrary to what he intended, however, his influence was negative and, in turn, Italy's standing has, indeed, diminished. Berlusconi believed that what had worked with his business associates would work on the international stage, forgetting, or not realizing, that the structural conditions were different. He was not the monarch addressing his eager court, a setting in which he thrives; when speaking for Italy he was seen more as a mid-level aristocrat in the midst of a large assembly of more powerful and prestigious peers.

Waltson (2007, p. 102) reckons that 'what Berlusconi did with his personal intervention was to raise Italy's profile internationally, for the most part attracting negative or condescending comments'. Similarly for Romano (2006), the traditional pillars of the country's foreign policy (the EU, the United States, the Mediterranean and the Middle East) were disregarded under Berlusconi, who took a more 'personal' view of foreign relations. In the end, the returns did not meet Berlusconi's hopes and expectations. The Italian tycoon had so much trust in his personal seductive abilities (Amadori 2002) that he thought he could disregard both Italy's relative position in international politics (the structure) as well as the societal milieu of his country and achieve unrivalled results in foreign policy for his country. Being the leader of a *coalition* cabinet should be taken into account, when considering the freedom of manoeuvre that an Italian premier has. Yet, Berlusconi's coalition partners know all too well that they relied heavily on his financing and media during the 2001, 2006 and 2008 election campaigns. His paramount role in the centre-right coalition, combined with his personal popular support, have made the constraints of Italy's domestic system became less cogent.

Nonetheless, his dubious consideration of what is 'politically correct' has often backfired on him and on the country itself. Even after his 2008 electoral victory, Berlusconi's informal style in foreign policy has tended towards an inappropriate ingenuity, often perceived by the international 'intelligentsia' as a disregard of the basic notions of diplomatic behaviour and political correctness. He is often depicted as a *gaffeur* (Stella 2007, Delaney 2007), a definition confirmed, in the international press, by his remarks after the victory of Barack Obama (*The Guardian* 2008, Donadio 2008, Associated Press 2008).

Personalities and foreign policy: towards a definition of 'friendship'

The importance of political personalities in foreign policymaking has long been an object of investigation, beginning in the 1950s and continuing with authors such as George (1969). For example, in his compelling investigation on the causes of the Allied victory in World War II, Overy (1996) devoted several pages to how the three leaders, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, got along together, how much they liked or disliked each other, and how they communicated. Quite telling is the description of a worried Churchill during his first personal meeting with Roosevelt, and how much the British premier, of utmost importance, wanted to 'make a good impression' on the US president. In the end, the two leaders quite sincerely liked each other.

In effect, political personalities have to be accounted for as affecting international relations not in absolute terms, but in relative terms. More specifically, individuals, whether prime ministers (Kaarbo 1997), presidents or majority leaders, have an image of themselves, which may or may not coincide with what others 'see'. Political leaders will bring those images with them inside the decision-making machinery (Holl 2005). Indeed, '[d]ecision-makers cannot avoid having *images* of others which will be affected by their own cultural and political baggage, as much as by the objective evidence' (Hill 2003, p. 111). The US and Russian Presidents and the British Prime Minister held certain images of Italy, and expected the Italian premier to fit those images. Berlusconi effortlessly, almost eagerly, proved the stereotype to be true (the image other have of ourselves influences the way we behave).

There is a long tradition of study in international relations that stresses the centrality of the vision that states (indeed, their political elites) hold of the international system (George 1969, Holsti 1970, Onuf 1989, Wendt 1992, 1999). Whether they 'see' themselves immersed in Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian anarchy (to use Wendt's typologies), surrounded by predators or potential partners, their behaviour is shaped in the international system. For instance, political leaders generically worry about national security, survival and their country's economic well-being and accordingly address these worries in their foreign and defence policies. Depending on how they perceive their status and the global environment, they will respect UN resolution, send humanitarian aid, or launch pre-emptive strikes.

Hill (2003, p. 110) notes that, more than the peculiarities of a leader's personality, it is 'the political space which might or might not exist to allow these qualities to impact on events'. Research has proved that leaders who view the world in more Hobbesian terms are less sensitive to the political context and are more likely to violate international norms than those who have a more benign view of international politics (Shannon and Keller 2007, p. 80). Yet, Hill's and Shannon and Keller's conclusions coincide substantially with Tallberg (2007) on the prevalence of the 'structure'. Nevertheless, the intervening variable, namely the leader's personality, may substantially alter the final outcome.

Owing to this state of affairs, a growing number of scholars in many countries cannot fail to appreciate the potential of political psychology (or 'the psychology of politics'). Whether to foster the study of conflicts and crisis (Janis 1989, Khong 1992, Stein 2002, Barash and Webel 2002), or of international relations theory (Goldgeier and Tetlock 2001, Schafr and

Walker 2006), or to understand 'distant' leaders (Post 2004, Dyson 2006), the application of psychological categories and perspectives to address global issues is one of the most promising areas of the international relations research. Here, the central research issue is the influence of human factors on political decision-making and power management processes, both at national and international levels (Goldgeier and Tetlock 2001).

A crucial issue in political psychology is the role of emotion in politics. The last few years have witnessed a burst of interest among political scientists on the topic of emotions (Marcus 2000, Crawford 2000, Abbate and Ferrero 2003). No longer thought to wreak havoc on human rationality, emotions are increasingly recognized as crucially affecting human thought, language and behaviour. Indeed, Hudson (2005, p. 18) considers the study of 'emotions' (alongside neuroscience and embodiment) as one of 'new frontiers' of research in contemporary foreign policy analysis.

Psychological research indicates that emotions are implicated in all aspects of cognition and behaviour, including attention, perception and memory, as well as attitude change, reasoning and decision-making, and interpersonal and intergroup relations. Emotions have also been studied as psychological processes and have contributed to elucidating the brain mechanisms that underlie cognition and behaviour. Not by chance, the importance of emotions, with respect to political discourse, campaigning and persuasion effectiveness, has recently been emphasized also in language studies, whether cognitive (Kövecses 1986, 2005, Lakoff 1996), socio-constructionist (Lupton 1998), interactional (Weigand 1998, 2003) or argumentational (Walton 1992, 2000, Plantin 1998) perspective.

Considering all this, scholars have recently begun to explore the role of emotion in political life, including its impact on the nature of the candidate appraisal process, the strategic use of emotions by campaigns, and the role of discrete emotions in the formation of policy attitudes. Needless to say, emotions do have a significant impact on international relationships as well as foreign affairs, which also motivate our choice of undertaking friendships rather than the more technical alliances as a perspective for analysis.

Political psychologists have investigated, among other things, the influence of character and personality traits of leaders, as well as motivations and social perceptions on foreign affairs management, which in other words means accounting for personality in 'interactional' terms. This line of argument will lead us towards an attempt to define what we mean by 'friendship' as an 'intervening variable' in international relations.

Since Aristotele (1986 VIII, 6, 115b), several scholars coming from the most diverse theoretical perspectives have addressed the notion of 'friendship' in combination with political relations. This long and contentious history testifies to the worthiness of such a perspective of enquiry and yet renders it difficult to provide a unique definition. Worth mentioning of course is the extensive work by Derrida (1997), who through a genealogical survey of thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Levinas traces out the differences among the various definitions provided. Most importantly, the genealogy reveals a vertiginous collapse among the concepts friend/enemy, friendship/enmity and self/other. In this regard, Carl Schmidt (1996 [1932]) notoriously considers the friend–enemy distinction as definitional for the 'political'.

Insisting on the same categories, Friedrich Nietzsche (1896, 1897) claimed instead that the categories of friend and enemy are not opposites, but closely related to one another, for the rather contradictory and even fluid nature of 'friendship', which shares with enmity elements of hostility, volatility and even danger. An extensive enquiry on the term and concept of 'friendship' and of its philological and philosophical foundations is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses rather on the necessity to account for 'friendship' among the relevant factors ('intervening variable') influencing international relations and therefore substantially affecting foreign policy as such.

In particular, by examining the psychological profile of subjects involved in foreign affairs and international decision-making, it has been discovered that the need of affiliation is the most important factor in improving cooperative behaviour between opposite parties, even more than the traditional political science explanation, namely the 'search for power'. Countless political leaders, in domestic as well as foreign policy issues, have been guided by a (more or less conscious) 'need of affiliation' in their relationship management. The 'need of affiliation' of Silvio Berlusconi surfaces with President G. W. Bush, who has often been described by the former as a 'personal friend', a 'very close friend' and a 'very unique person' (Eggen 2008a). Since 9/11, closeness to Bush has been not only a guideline for Italian foreign policy, but also the cornerstone of what was presented by Berlusconi, outside the terms of traditional diplomacy, as a disinterested and pure friendship.

The 'need for affiliation' (*N-Affil*) has gained a scientific status thanks to David McClelland (1961, 1987), and describes a person's need to feel a sense of involvement and 'belonging' to a social group. McClellend's thinking was strongly influenced by the pioneering work of Henry Murray (1938), who first identified underlying psychological human needs and motivational processes. It was Murray who set out a taxonomy of needs, including achievement, power and affiliation – and placed these in the context of an integrated motivational model. People with a high need for affiliation require warm interpersonal relationships and approval from those with whom they have regular contact. People who place high emphasis on affiliation tend to be supportive team members, but may be less effective in decision-making processes.

Using a N-Affil strategy in foreign affairs may lead to:

1. better feelings of joint responsibility and support (that can be used for facing increased interior policy problems);
2. speedy decisions about foreign affairs questions (although 'speedy' does not necessarily mean 'good');
3. more freedom from bureaucratic diplomatic procedures.

In short, good personal relations can support more informal decision-making processes regarding diplomatic and foreign affairs questions. A more complex world tends to require quicker and 'simpler' answers. Having a strong personal relationship network in the world scene seems to be a solution. Certainly, Silvio Berlusconi, along with several other political leaders, believes this to be true (Amadori 2002, Abbate and Ferrero 2003). Using this personal approach, however, inevitably involves a higher probability of typical social biases, such as halo effects and group-think for the individuals involved.

The political style of Silvio Berlusconi

First and foremost, Silvio Berlusconi sees himself as an extremely seductive person and, during his tenure as premier, has proved time and again that he really believes in friendly human relations as an instrument for foreign policy (Amadori 2002, Roncarolo 2005, Pasquino 2007). The effort was twofold: to abandon diplomatic distance, mistrust, suspicion, circumspection and prudence and to develop direct friendly relations based on direct familiarity and personal feeling with opposite parties of other countries. This also meant caring national interests without professional mediation by part of a diplomatic body (whose mediation has been fundamental in the last 50 years). A telling example was the Nato–Russia meeting in Pratica di Mare (a little town with an important military airport), in May 2002. During this meeting, he practised a strong 'seduction diplomacy' based not only on the 'distance reduction strategy', but also on innovative communication methods focused on his personal, individual charm.

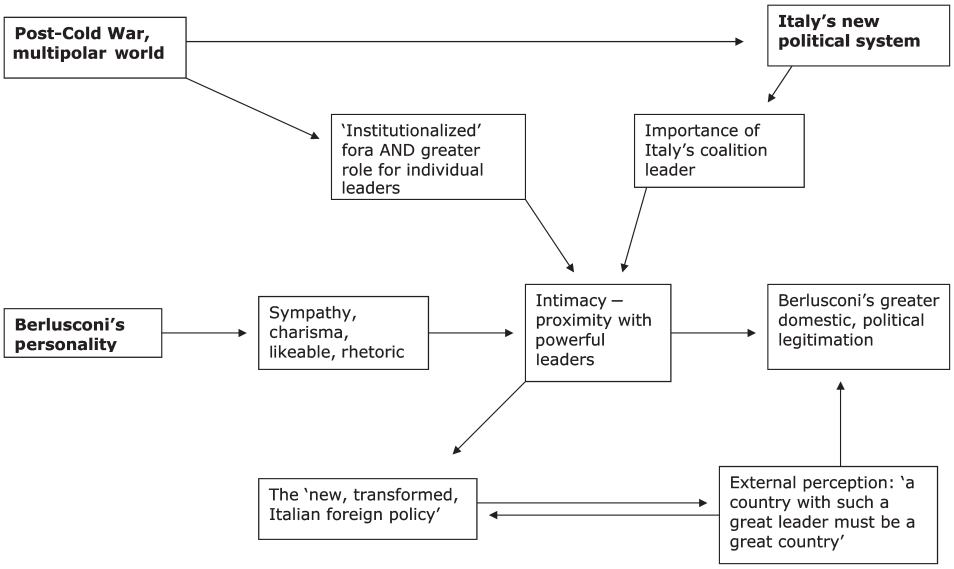

Figure 1. Silvio Berlusconi's road map.

As indicated in Figure 1, the post-Cold War structural change has not only made possible changes in the Italian political system (Panebianco 1997), so that the Italian premier has more leverage on its cabinet, but also provided more forums where leaders can interact more frequently and 'get to know each other well'. Berlusconi, with his personality, thrives in such intimate conditions (Amadori 2002). Hence, he saw these opportunities as the way to launch a 'renewed' personal foreign policy. This new foreign policy of Italy would: (1) make foreign publics think that 'with such a great leader, it *must* be a great country'; and (2) boost Berlusconi's domestic legitimization, which would also benefit directly from the premier's closeness to other great statesmen.

The rise of the seduction diplomacy was quite new for Italian foreign policy, conjoining political science, diplomacy and psychology in a very confusing, but innovative, mix. Beyond the Italian situation, one can observe a general trend towards a deeper integration between political techniques and psychological attitudes in foreign affairs management all over the world (and, in particular, in the most developed part of the world). Examples in this direction have been provided by various premiers and heads of state: Blair, Bush, Chirac and Putin. All of them (and not by chance) happen to belong to Berlusconi's network of 'friends'. All of them have used direct and informal personal relations as an accessory instrument of foreign policy. Tallberg's (2007) analysis of EU summits is a valuable example of this state of affairs.

The friendship-based foreign policy of Silvio Berlusconi can be assessed by looking at what was at stake for Italy, and whether the country actually benefited from Berlusconi's style. The reasons why Premier Berlusconi struck a chord with these leaders of powerful countries are diverse. Reasons for friendship with George W. Bush are most straightforward and generally ascribable to a similarity-based likeableness: both men like to stress their no-nonsense, business background and view politics as another form of business activity to be run using management styles (Frum 2005). Using Hermann *et al.*'s (2001, p. 95) classification, particularly with reference to the 'relationship focus', both have 'evangelistic/charismatic' personalities.

Tony Blair has a different education and style; but he too has an 'evangelistic/charismatic' persona. His crusader-like approach to international politics and his enduring success in national

politics attracted sincere admiration from Berlusconi. At first glance, Berlusconi' friendship with Vladimir Putin, the 'pragmatist/opportunist' (Hermann *et al.* 2001, pp. 96–97), is the oddest: the former is a self-styled capitalist, the latter, an ex-KGB operative. In this case, both men see themselves as 'saviours' of their countries from greater perils (old-style Communism for Berlusconi and Chechen terrorism and Russian decline for Putin). More importantly, Berlusconi saw himself (and hence Italy) as a 'bridge' to bring Russia (firmly) into the democracies' club. To Russia, Berlusconi would be the guarantor that it would be accepted, and to 'the West', that Russia would be fully committed to democracy.

The greatest success of Italian diplomacy in the Berlusconi era was its role in blocking the reform of the UN Security Council. Germany, a strong potential candidate for the Council, teamed up with other would-be members, India and Brazil, to win enough support among delegates in the General Assembly to secure a permanent (or semi-permanent) seat in the Security Council. Italy, with other countries (such as Argentina or Pakistan), worked hard to prevent such reform. Italy's efforts were mainly aimed at blocking Germany (with three EU countries in the new Council, Italy would hardly ever sit on the Council again). The reform has now been put on hold. At least some of that 'success' was due to Mr Berlusconi's proximity to Tony Blair and George W. Bush. The United States and, to a lesser extent, the UK, did support Italy's effort.

On the other hand, Italy paid a heavy price for siding with what has become known as 'the axis of feeble' (*The Economist* 2006a). Despite the casualties in Iraq (33 soldiers), the money spent and Berlusconi's friendship with President Bush, the US foreign policy establishment's attitude towards Italy has hardly changed, as it sees Italy as an eager ally that, in the end, would rather back down than collide head-on with Washington. This 'entrapment' (Brighi 2006) has been proved in reality time and again (Battistelli 2004).

The heaviest loss, however, was in Italy's position within the EU. France, Germany and other 'old' members never forgave the Italian government for enlisting in the 'Atlanticists' camp' (the UK, Spain, Poland and most of the new members) and Silvio Berlusconi for his politics. Not only was Italy's semester of EU presidency (Fall 2003) frustrating for the country and its government, but also on top of this, since 2003, Berlusconi has been excluded from all informal high-level meetings among Europeans, and even among Atlanticists (Brighi 2006).

This state of affairs turned out to be detrimental to Italy's international image. Few of Berlusconi's advisors (and the premier himself) understood that, in foreign policy, more often than not the 'perceived' *is* the content. He saw foreign policy as an excellent arena for self-legitimization (Andreatta and Brighi 2003). What could be more rewarding, in terms of prestige and self-enhancement, for his 'need for affiliation' than joining the most exclusive club of global decision-makers?

Berlusconi and his advisors, however, did not fully appreciate the structural conditions. In the words of Tallberg (2007), during EU negotiations, Berlusconi was consistently portrayed as a maverick leader with a limited interest in EU issues, erratic negotiation behaviour, and a self-assumed role as the comedian of the club. He displayed the same traits at *all* international meetings. Berlusconi ended up applying his *simpatico* style, which is highly successful under domestic conditions (Amadori 2002), within the thoroughly different settings of international politics, further hampering the country's international standing. He found it extremely easy to be the charming, slightly sexist, *bon vivant* Italian, all but reinforcing the stereotype of a country of nice people, not to be taken seriously.

With friends like these: Bush and Berlusconi's genuine friendship

Silvio Berlusconi and George W. Bush truly struck a cord with each other from the very beginning. Romano (2006, pp. 102–103) observed that Berlusconi embraced more pro-US priorities

because he was shunned by European leaders and he felt more ideological affinity with President George W. Bush. Ultimately, Berlusconi wanted to maximize personal and national prestige (the N-Affil). Both men prided themselves on being a truly 'self-made man'. Their life stories, however, had been considerably different. Berlusconi had a university education and some help from his family, and received considerable political support from the socialist party in Milan, but was truly smart in assessing the devastating power of the emerging private television business in Italy. The second had been a 'party animal' at Yale and Harvard and ended up in the family oil business, before honourably serving as Governor of Texas. The two men, however, have much more in common than would appear at first glance.

George W. Bush has been described as one of those leaders skilled in the art of social influence (Frum 2005, Woodward 2006), with a 'charming, engaging personal style that tends to make people like them and overlook their gaffes and foibles' (Imelmann 2001, p. 101). Such a description fits Silvio Berlusconi (Amadori 2002) so well that the two seem cut from the same cloth. If one omits, 'gaffes and foibles', it is the exact portrait of Tony Blair (see further). As Texas's governor, Bush enjoyed presenting himself as a 'uniter' a 'team-builder'; equally, Berlusconi saw himself as a 'coalition-builder' (Pasquino 2007, p. 40). George Bush is a re-born Christian who has made his faith and his 'relationship' with God, especially after 9/11, two pillars of his decision-making. Faith and religion are typically part of those high values on which the foreign policy of the Bush administration has been based (Moens 2004). What Woodward describes in his *State of denial* (2006) is the typical reaction of the messianic leader when confronted with actual situations that diverge from the expected path.

Silvio Berlusconi, a latent womanizer, likes to present himself as a devoted 'family man'. He confirmed this stereotypical personality in his apologetic reply to the bitter letter his wife sent to the daily *La Repubblica* (notoriously critical of Berlusconi) in early 2007, demanding public excuses for his sexist remarks during a *gala* offered by his media company (Stella, 2007, Delaney, 2007). Moreover, Berlusconi too frequently relies on 'messianism' as justification for his policymaking (Pasquino 2007, pp. 50–51). In this sense, he is known to have remarked in 2006 'I am the Jesus Christ of politics . . . [because] . . . I sacrifice myself for everyone' (quoted in Fisher and Povoledo, 2008).

Last but not least, as Moens (2004, p. 2) noted, neither US Congressmen nor foreign leaders had much influence on the US President, unless they became part of his 'loyalty circle'. Berlusconi operates along those same lines (Amadori 2002, Pasquino 2007) and was admitted into Bush's circle (Eggen 2008b). Bush, in fact, had many ways of showing appreciation; being invited to his Texas ranch was a favourite: Berlusconi was the second leader, after Blair, to be invited to celebrate Bush's re-election in 2004.

The number of occasions on which George Bush showed that he liked Silvio Berlusconi have been too many to say that their relationship simply led to 'business as usual' between the two allied countries. Despite their relationship, during their time in office, Italy and the United States had plenty of opportunities for conflicts to arise. The Americans did not like the fact that Italian officials repeatedly negotiated with, and paid hefty ransoms to, insurgents who had kidnapped Italian citizens (either journalists or aid-workers). In one opportunity for conflict, in May 2005, an Italian secret service officer was killed at a US Army check-point. Italian investigative authorities received little cooperation from the Pentagon and a number of questions remained open. Nevertheless, later in 2005, Bush and Berlusconi signed a contract for Italy's helicopter-maker Agusta to produce transport helicopters in the United States for the US Army; even the President's helicopter, the Marine One, would be made by Agusta. This type of contract is truly a sign of consideration, as it is usually reserved for the most dependable allies, such as Israel or the UK.

The Berlusconi cabinet followed the same pattern when CIA operatives conducted an 'extraordinary rendition' in Milan in 2003. Italian magistrates sent a formal request for interrogation of the CIA operatives but the request did not even reach the US Embassy in Rome. In fact, the Italian Minister of Justice had refused to submit it to the US government. Time and again, Berlusconi assured the public that he would 'clarify' this issue with 'his friend'. Yet, no deeds followed those words. In the end, the investigation was upheld.

From the defence contract for Italian helicopters to Berlusconi's invitation to speak before the US Congress in spring 2006, just a few weeks before the Italian elections (another important sign of distinction and consideration, as only twice before had Italian political leaders been invited), Berlusconi and Bush remained sincere friends even after Berlusconi lost the premiership in April 2006 and Bush came to the end of his presidency. In 2006, it appeared that Berlusconi, following the example of the former Spanish premier Aznar, wanted to launch an 'alternative' foreign policy. He would shuttle between Washington and Milan to lunch at the White House, while, right after the elections, Premier Prodi was put on hold (Franco 2006).

Berlusconi as opposition leader did not miss a chance to prove his friendship with the US President. When Berlusconi was hospitalized for a minor heart operation at the end of 2006, he let the Italian media know that 'his friend George' had sent him his best wishes. During their term, Berlusconi's cabinet had given permission for the enlargement of an important US base for airborne troops in northern Italy. The enlargement was deeply resented by the local population, who did not want (and did not need) an increase in the level of US troops in their small, artistic (the birthplace of Italian architect Palladio) and wealthy city. The Prodi government was, at first, determined to withdraw the authorization (Nese 2007).

The opposition and Berlusconi personally were quick to seize the opportunity to accuse the government of *anti-americanismo* and of belonging to an anti-Israel, pro-Iran 'Euro-Arab alliance' that only serves 'French interests' (Franco 2007a, p. 5). The government had to back down, with considerable strains within its own coalition, so that Premier Prodi could qualify as 'friend of the United States' as well (Del Re 2007a). Regardless of the outcome, Silvio Berlusconi reaffirmed himself as the most loyal Bush ally in the Mediterranean.

Silvio Berlusconi and George W. Bush did strike a mutual and sincere friendship, as we have shown above. Nevertheless, even in such a favourable case, Italy could not raise its standing with the hegemon and enter the 'most-trusted allies' club, along with Britain, Australia, Israel and Japan. Once again, the capabilities–expectations gap (Hill 1993) could not be closed. In fact, in his N-Affil strategy, Berlusconi's rhetoric set expectations so high that Italy could never have fulfilled them. Iraq proved to be too tough a test. In the end, frustration prevailed in the United States and Italy both domestically and bilaterally. The relationship of the two leaders has remained as good as ever and, paradoxically, Berlusconi can now fully 'use' their relationship for domestic purposes (Franco 2007b) without the risk of it becoming form and substance of Italy's foreign policy.

Political ideologies are a thing of the past I: Silvio Berlusconi and Tony Blair

If in the case of President Bush a high degree of political overlap may have contributed to the initial relationship between Bush and Berlusconi, ideological proximity is (or rather, should be) missing in the case of Tony Blair. '[T]he best communicator to dominate British politics since Churchill' (Freedland 2007), Blair came to office thanks to his 'modernization' of the Labour Party. Blair pulled the party out from its left-wing corner, shelved most of its remaining Marxist ideology, embraced liberalism and, as did US Democrats, aimed for the 'median' voter. This strategy has been truly successful, securing three consecutive victories for the Labour Party. Had things been different, Tony Blair would probably have been the right

person to win a fourth one (*The Economist* 2006b). Yet, one of the most distinctive (and largely appreciated) features of Tony Blair, his sincere commitment, to the point of being 'unshaken' even in the direst situations, to higher political ethics in domestic as well as international politics (Gerson 2007), has turned out to be the determinant cause of his undoing.

With various degree of success, since the end of World War II Great Britain has tried to be 'a bridge' between Europe and the United States (Gamble 2003, Kampfner 2003, Schafr and Walker 2006). Tony Blair is one of the British Prime Ministers to have best fulfilled that role (Groom 2005, Freedland 2007). As the 'hopeful interventionist' (*The Economist* 2006, 21 May), determined not to repeat Britain's mistake during the Bosnia war, Blair managed to win over the Clinton administration during the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 (Kampfner 2003). Tony Blair and Bill Clinton seemed cut from the same fabric; ideologically, they shared a progressive, modern, liberal vision. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush could not be more alien to one another. Yet, after 9/11, Blair saw President Bush, with his drive to fight terrorism and to spread democracy, as a fellow 'true believer': in his goodbye speech on 10 May 2007, referring to 9/11, Blair stated 'I decided we should stand shoulder to shoulder with our oldest ally. I did so out of belief.' The quasi-religious fervour the Bush administration put into fulfilling such a vision could not suit Tony Blair better (Ignazi and Giacomello 2003, Kampfner 2003, Gray 2004, Schafr and Walker 2006, *The Economist* 2006a, Freedland 2007).

Adhering to the 'bridge theory', Blair thought that British loyalty in the fight would be rewarded by the US ally with some concessions in areas such as the Kyoto Protocol, a Palestinian state or the International Criminal Court (Kampfner 2003). Such concessions would then be shown to EU allies as proof that the British 'bridge' would benefit both sides of the Atlantic. President Bush disappointed the dependable British premier time and again: the British Army was bogged down in Iraq as badly as its US counterpart and hardly any concession in international criminal law, environmental protection, or the Middle East had been granted. Worse still, the Bush administration did not refrain from using the British premier to prop up faltering allies such as Spain's Aznar or Silvio Berlusconi (Kampfner 2003, Groom 2005). Consequently, hostility towards the British leadership increased steadily among older members of the EU.

As with George W. Bush, the war in Iraq proved to be the 'kiss of death' for Tony Blair. Labour Party members blamed him for failing to uncover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and for repeatedly lying to them and the public. The last straw came with the July 2006 G8 meeting in St Petersburg, when Blair was filmed standing at the side of George Bush while the latter was having lunch: the image of 'butler' Blair ready to serve his master was all many Britons and non-Britons alike could see (*The Economist* 2006b,c). If the general embarrassment is wirily summarized by *The Economist*, Rutenberg (2006) provides a more detailed account of the 'chit-chat' between the two leaders, including Bush's propensity to interrupt Blair.

On paper, Blair, the leader of the left-wing Labour Party, should not have got along well with the conservative businessman-turned-politician, Berlusconi, even allowing for their individual commitment to supporting the United States. Get along well they did; however, it might have been, as Gray (2004) argues, because Tony Blair was a 'neo-Thatcherite', and Silvio Berlusconi, an admirer of Margaret Thatcher himself, would not fail to see their differences and empathize with Blair. To stress discontinuity with the past, the second Berlusconi cabinet was characterized, from the outset, by a strong anti-EU attitude (Croci 2005, Romano 2006). Hence, Pasquino (2007, p. 49) concludes he might have enjoyed warm and friendly relations with Tony Blair because of their shared position. The reasons for their friendship, however, were deeper than that, and more personal.

In commenting on the tycoon's electoral defeat in 2006, Gilbert (2006, p. 49) observed that 'Berlusconi has pioneered a meretricious, media-driven, post-modern brand of politics that accentuates his image, glosses over inconvenient facts, and focuses attention on his personality,

rather than on the traditions and program of the party he leads'. But then, Gilbert wirily concludes, 'has Tony Blair really been so different?' Indeed, Blair's 'control-freakery and obsession with media coverage' (Freedland 2007) is astonishingly similar to Berlusconi's (Amadori 2002, Roncarolo 2005). Yet, Blair somehow managed to establish himself as more than a mere 'politician', rather as 'the leader' of the nation, a position from which it is far harder to be dislodged, as Freedland (2007) noted. Berlusconi never reached that far.

According to Dyson (2006), Blair has a high belief in his ability to control events, a low conceptual complexity, and a high need for power. Dyson's conclusions are consistent with the analysis of Schafr and Walker (2006), who note that, although he sees the future as unpredictable and politics as made of both cooperation and conflict, Blair has a strong confidence in his ability to control events, especially when his counterparts are democratic leaders. Blair, extremely self-confident, rose through the ranks of the Labour Party determined to reverse the party's attitude on business and the private sector, disposing of most of the old socialist ideology (Foley 2000).

All messianic (or 'evangelistic') leaders tend to rely on populist rhetoric, and indeed, the 'repeated invocation of the people continued to be a distinguishing characteristic of [the] Blair premiership' (Foley 2000, p. 105). All such traits have characterized the political rise of Silvio Berlusconi as well as his premiership (Amadori 2002, Roncarolo 2005, Pasquino 2007), and the similarities between the two personalities are truly striking.

Silvio Berlusconi and Tony Blair apparently had a friendly relationship, and the British Prime Minister enjoyed being a guest at Berlusconi's villa in Sardinia. The coziness between Blair and Berlusconi, however, never turned into an effective alliance at the EU level between Italy and the UK. Blair continued to see Chirac, Schroeder and even Aznar as his main counterparts in the EU. Nor did their relationship translate into the EU accepting Italy as at minimum a 'junior' partner in the Anglo-Saxon alliance that was actually combating terrorism.

While 'Blair felt comfortable with José Maria Aznar . . . [his] relationship with Berlusconi was much more circumspect' (Kampfner 2003, p. 251). Despite the smiles and bonhomie during their numerous meetings, Blair seemed not to have appreciated the mix of business and politics that characterized the media tycoon turned premier. In conclusion, the two displayed very similar personality traits, but Tony Blair probably did not like what he saw of himself in Silvio Berlusconi.

Political ideologies are a thing of the past II: Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin

If it is puzzling that Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi get along quite well, that Silvio Berlusconi developed a sincere friendship and admiration for Putin is astounding. For a good part of their lives, Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin believed (or appeared to believe) in irreconcilable values: Communism and the superpower status of the USSR for the KGB officer; capitalism and individual freedom for the self-made businessman. Nevertheless, for Berlusconi, Vladimir Putin is no less of a friend than George W. Bush (Pasquino 2007, p. 50). What really attracted Berlusconi to Putin was the conviction that he could be the facilitator of Putin and Russia's transition to the liberal West. After all, several of Berlusconi's trusted aides and advisors were former Communists.

With the zeal of the converted, this group accounted for the most loyal supporters of Berlusconi's persona. Russia had joined the G7 (now G8) during the Genoa summit in 2001, so it almost seemed natural to Silvio Berlusconi that he would be Russia's guarantor with the EU, NATO and, presumably because of his friendship with President Bush, the United States as well.

Ever since Lenin, Russian politics has been highly personalized, favouring the 'strong' personality leader. Under such conditions, Putin's strengths, namely his determination and pragmatism, have produced remarkable results (Sakwa 2004). Putin's cooperative pragmatism

is what made his personal relationships with George W. Bush and Tony Blair work (Sakwa 2004, p. 209). It made the relationship with Berlusconi work as well.

President Putin has shown a consistent attitude towards using the oil-gas leverage *vis-à-vis* the EU and Russia's neighbours on more than one occasion (*The Economist* 2006d). In winter 2005/06 the confrontation was with Ukraine. In winter 2006/07, Putin's Russia clashed on oil supply, this time with Bielorussia, and again in 2008 with Ukraine. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin and the Russian public had barely considered Europe and the EU as a potential security threat (Light *et al.* 2000). Indeed, Putin has adopted a different discourse when addressing George Bush and the United States versus an EU leader: in the former case, the superpower-to-superpower attitude prevails; in the latter, emphasis is on 'we are all good neighbours in the European house' (Hopf 2005). Unlike his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, however, Putin was hardly liked in the West, with one exception: Berlusconi's Italy.

Berlusconi's political and psychological tactics with Putin were considerably different from those he adopted with Bush and Blair. In the latter case, he tried to establish himself as a dependable ally; in the former case, Berlusconi saw himself, and his role as Italian premier, as the gatekeeper who would open the door to the West for Vladimir Putin. Much as Tony Blair could be the 'bridge' between the United States and Europe, so Silvio Berlusconi could be the 'bridge' between Europe and Russia. He went as far as suggesting that Russia should join the EU and to the 'bewilderment of many a statesman in the EU' (Brighi 2006, p. 291) defended Russia's policy in Chechnya. The attitude of EU partners to Berlusconi's friendship with Putin is well summarized by the *Irish Time* '[t]he Italian Prime Minister, Mr. Silvio Berlusconi, annoyed many of his EU partners by parading an excessively cosy relationship with Russia's President, Vladimir Putin' (Staunton 2004, p. 54).

Of the three cases considered here, Berlusconi's friendship with Putin was probably the most damaging for the Italian leader for one very simple reason – while all EU partners recognize that Europe cannot do without the UK and, even after the unilateralist Bush administration, the United States, despite their best efforts, few Europeans are willing to consider Russia a dependable ally. EU countries, Germany *in primis*, know that they need Russia's gas, but they continue to keep Russia at arm's length. Berlusconi's appeals for Russian membership in the EU and justification for the 'war on terror' in Chechenya drastically undermined his hope to be Russia's trustee in Europe. Moreover, after these appeals, EU partners all but lost any hope that Italy would revert back to its traditional European politics.

Remarkably, Berlusconi's defeat (Dragosei 2007) and resurgence have only strengthened the friendly relationship between him and Vladimir Putin. As with George Bush, Silvio Berlusconi now stresses this friendship for domestic ends, not missing any opportunity to underline Putin's 'true dedication' to building democracy in Russia (Del Re 2007b).

Conclusions

A country's bargaining power is certainly the product of its material capabilities and of its standing in the international arena (Tallberg 2007); but the personality of the country's chief executive officer, its premier or president, is a 'multiplier', whether positive, negative or neutral, which 'intervenes' and affects the country's international standing. Berlusconi's 'new' foreign policy was a change in the form that, relying on his personal traits, satisfied his need for affiliation; but Berlusconi's highly visible persona is a condensation of the negative stereotypes about Italy, and because form is substance in international politics, he affected the country's international profile negatively.

Friendship among freely elected leaders appears to be a risky bet to hedge against the future. As *The Economist* (2006, 18 March, p. 31) noted, commenting on the first television debate

between the incumbent Silvio Berlusconi and the challenger Romano Prodi in March 2006, 'Europeans have a long record of unsentimentally discarding leaders that got carried away by their own importance'. The British newspaper quoted Charles de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher as examples. The list could be much longer, with other illustrious cases such as Winston Churchill, one of the winners of World War II, or Helmut Kohl, the maker of German unity.

Although some degree of empathy is hoped for among decision-makers, investing time, energy and prestige in a *deep* personal relationship with a political leader who, before next meeting, might well be sacked by his/her own constituency, does not appear to be a sensible move. In this work, we identified the reasons why Silvio Berlusconi undertook that course of action. Overall, unlike George Bush and Tony Blair, Silvio Berlusconi did not suffer politically for his support of the Iraq war. Albeit he, too, indulged all too often in a 'state of denial', Berlusconi's sympathizers did not consider his failures in foreign policy a good enough motive to withdraw their support. They did not see foreign policy as having an inherently different grammar and a different logic and could not understand why elites and public alike in other countries so disliked Berlusconi. In fact, this state of affairs generated an even stronger admiration for and solidarity with Berlusconi by his supporters for their leader.

Premier Berlusconi is interested mainly in the 'surface' of foreign policy, its 'appearance' more than its substance. He is out of his element with the intricacies of international politics, which have little attraction for him: he concluded that Russia and the United States would now work together more easily, because Dimirti Meedved and Barak Obama are both 'young' (Associated Press 2008). One just needs to look at how he masterly defended himself in court against charges of corruption and tax-dodging for several years to assess how effective Silvio Berlusconi might have been, had he understood foreign policy and invested the same energy as he did while defending himself in court.

In the analysis of foreign policies, 'personalities' in government elites are crucial factors. Personality greatly influences the 'role' that a political leader decides to play; but individuals cannot entirely decide what roles to play, as 'roles' are also influenced by the expectations of other actors. In international affairs, Italy is seen as an average European member of the Western democracies' club, hence preferring multilateralism, humanitarian aid and peacekeeping operations (Battistelli 2004) to aggressively fighting terrorism. Berlusconi's friendly foreign policy could not change that structural view of Italy; nor could he alone turn well-seated EU or US suspicions that Russia would never be a full member of the democracies' club for the foreseeable future.

In the agent–structure dilemma, leaders with strong, powerful personalities can truly tilt the balance of which factors better explain the 'agent'. As we have shown, there is little doubt that Silvio Berlusconi possessed a potent personality and commanded widespread support. When Berlusconi became Italy's premier in 2001, he faced favourable circumstances to change the country's foreign policy dramatically. The end of the Cold War had given way to a more flexible, multipolar world. Next to the highly institutionalized forums of dialogue of the bipolar world, new opportunities for international discussions surfaced, where the skills and personality of individual leaders would count more for shaping international politics.

With a certain degree of charisma, a knack for populist rhetoric and experience in entertainment, Silvio Berlusconi was well equipped for delving into the post-Cold War world. He did not fully understand, however, that foreign policy is still different from domestic politics. In the former, the form is possibly more important than in the latter (particularly in Italian politics) and hence camaraderie, jokes and other displays of 'friendship' should be manifested sparingly. More importantly, these practices should be functional to a political strategy, with long-term, clear goals. Instead, Berlusconi's objective was, by and large, to enhance his domestic legitimization and exposure in foreign policy. Although the powerful friendships satisfied his need for

affiliation, the 'international and European prestige of Italy significantly declined, so much so that Italy was rarely or never invited to the British–Franco–German summits' (Pasquino 2007, p. 50). Spain, in fact, was a more frequent participant.

Several authors (Croci 2005, Brighi 2006, Waltson 2007) explain that there was change in the form but little change in the substance of Berlusconi's 'new' foreign policy. The argument is correct, but we should make a distinction here between the consequences for Berlusconi and those for Italy's international status. There was little substantial change, or rather a worsening in Italy's standing, because of its repositioning in the EU. This was due to Berlusconi's interest only in the visibility of foreign policy, which he got aplenty and used domestically. It might have been a modest change in substance, but it was mostly due to Berlusconi's words in the international arena.

To conclude, Silvio Berlusconi could have been more 'substantive', as we have argued, if he had a finer, better appreciation of what foreign policy in a multipolar world is all about. Had he a different persona, he could have sided with Chirac and Schroeder on Iraq, making Blair feel more isolated in Europe and, thus, more prone to compromise or less willing to follow the US President. With a more cohesive EU, United States' foreign policy might have been less confrontational (and there would have been a smaller 'coalition of the willing') and Russia would have faced uncompromising condemnation of its acts in Chechenya; and Silvio Berlusconi would have been more successful in a domain, foreign policy, where few thought he could be.

Our work addressing Berlusconi in relation to Bush, Blair and Putin, has been a probe into the phenomenon of friendship among political leaders. We are thoroughly aware that getting to a solid, definitive understanding of how emotions, such as friendship or love, may impact on relations among sovereign states is problematic. Furthermore, we need more precise tools for analysis. More in-depth analysis of the conditions under which friendship is defined and emerges is required to come out with exhaustive results. Our conclusions are, nonetheless, still a testimony to the power that the ideas, discourse and personality of a *single* leader might entail.

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Note

1. The other crucial explanatory variable is the domestic political system of the country. As Lijphart (1999) explains, it certainly makes a considerable difference whether the executive power is concentrated in a single-party majority cabinet or a broad multiparty coalition. Kaarbo and Beasley (2008) recently showed that coalitions are neither more aggressive nor more peaceful than single-party cabinets, but that they do engage in more extreme foreign policy behaviours.

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