

Bush-Putin Summit in Kennebunkport: The New Cold War

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Presidents Bush and Putin concluded their brief summit in Kennebunkport , Maine without resolving any of the main issues. Bush seeks Putin's help to pressure Iran into giving up its nuclear enrichment program and Putin wants Bush to abandon his plans to deploy the US Missile Defense System in Czechoslovakia and Poland . No progress was made on either topic.

Russia and the United States are now more politically divided than any time since the breakup of the Soviet Union . In fact, following the meeting in Maine , first deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, blasted Washington in the blistering rhetoric of the Cold War era:

"They are trying to push us into knocking heads with Europe ... in order to create a new dividing line, a New Berlin Wall," bawled Ivanov. "It is obvious that continuing with the plans and carrying them out by placing rockets in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic will present an obvious threat to Russia."

Ivanov is right. Missile Defense poses a clear danger to Russia 's national security. It integrates the United States entire nuclear capability (including space-based operations) with systems that are inside Russia 's traditional sphere of influence. Putin summed it up like this in a press conference at the G-8 meetings:

"For the first time in history, there are elements of the US nuclear capability on the European continent. It simply changes the whole configuration of international security.....Of course, we have to respond to that."

The Bush administration is trying to achieve what nuclear weapons specialist, Francis A. Boyle, calls the "longstanding US policy of nuclear first-strike against Russia ". By placing weapons systems and radar on Russia 's borders the US will have a critical advantage that will disrupt the essential balance of power. This is forcing Putin to restart the arms race.

The media has tried to downplay the gravity of the situation by focusing on the personal aspects of the Putin-Bush relationship. But this is intentionally misleading. Putin did not go to Kennebunkport to win-back Bush's affections or for sensitivity-therapy. He went to see if he could change Bush's mind on an issue that could quickly escalate into a nuclear standoff.

Putin has made a number of offers designed to satisfy Bush's concerns for "enhanced security". For example, Putin proposed a "global integrated missile shield that would protect

all of Europe” and would include both the United States and European countries, including neutral ones such as Austria , Finland and Sweden . All of the participating countries in the program would have equal access to the system’s control.”

“We are proposing to create a single missile defense system for all participants with equal access to the system’s control,” Ivanov said on the state-run Russian TV.

The Russian proposal would “create missile defense data exchange centers in Moscow and Brussels , headquarters of NATO and the European Union. Ivanov also did not rule out the sharing by Russia of some of its “highly sensitive” technologies with the West as part of creating the new integrated system, in order to generate trust in thwarting rouge missile threats.” (There’s been no coverage of this offer in the western media)

Putin also reiterated his earlier offer to allow the US to use existing “early warning” radar located in Azerbaijan that can observe the launching and flight of any long-range ballistic missiles from Iran. Bush politely rejected that offer, too.

These are reasonable offers made in good faith to mitigate Bush’s “so-called” concerns about security.

But Bush is not serious about defense or security. His real intention is to force Moscow to do whatever Washington wants by putting a loaded gun to their head. Putin can’t allow this to happen.

Bush’s doggedness has already triggered a strong reaction from the Kremlin. When Putin was rebuffed by Bush at the G-8 meetings a month ago, he promptly retaliated at the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg less than 24 hours later. In his address to the conference, he called for “a new architecture of economic relations requiring a completely new approach (with an) alternative global financial center that will make the ruble the reserve currency for central banks.” He said that the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the IMF are “archaic, undemocratic and inflexible” and do not “ reflect the new balance of power.”

Putin’s speech is seen as a direct challenge to Washington ’s global leadership and the institutions which preserve its position as the world’s only “superpower”. He rejects US hegemony” and the prevailing doctrine of “unipolar” world order.

The Kremlin reacted just as quickly after the “Lobster Summit” at Kennebunkport . Less than 10 hours after Putin’s departure from the US, deputy Prime Minister Ivanov warned that if Bush deployed Missile Defense in Eastern Europe, Russia “would place medium-range nuclear missiles in Kalliningrad”, a small finger of Russian-owned territory sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. This would put Russian-controlled nuclear weapons just a few hundred miles from the heart of Europe .

Ivanov added, “If our proposals are accepted, however, Russia would no longer need to deploy new missile systems in our European territory, including Kaliningrad .”

Putin and Ivanov apparently rehearsed this “good cop, bad cop” routine before Putin even arrived in the USA . But their point is still well taken. Putin is forcing Bush to decide whether he wants to work for regional stability or “turn Europe into a powder keg”. It’s up to Bush.

Putin knows that the Bush administration is full of Cold War militarists who deliberately sabotaged the ABM Treaty so they could expand their nuclear arsenal while surrounding Russia with American bases. He also knows that these same arm-chair warriors embrace a belligerent National Security Strategy that advocates “preemptive” first-strike attacks on rivals and which may include the use of low-yield, bunker-busting nuclear weapons. Putin—who has watched the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan from the sidelines—knows that the threat of American aggression cannot be taken lightly. He must carefully consider the “stated goals” of the administration for global domination and prepare for the worst. He cannot allow the Missile Defense System to be deployed even if that means “unilaterally” taking it out.

But why would Bush choose to confront Russia now when American troops and resources are already stretched to the limit? What is Bush thinking?

The Bush administration and their counterparts in the far-right think tanks still believe that America can be a big player in the fight to control resources in the Caspian Basin and Central Asia . The war on terror was basically designed to conceal US geopolitical ambitions in Eurasia—not Iraq . The neocons managed to expand the conflict to Iraq , but ruling elites have had serious misgivings about the invasion-occupation from the very beginning. Now the failures in Iraq are weakening the military, constraining US involvement in Central Asia and Latin America, and triggering anxiety among “old order” conservatives who think that the greater project may collapse altogether if Iraq does not wind-down quickly so the US can refocus on its original goals. This may explain why the defections in the senate are beginning to snowball and why the establishment media is suddenly calling for a draw-down of troops. The situation has gotten so bad that it’s impossible for Washington to execute its broader imperial strategy.

Demonizing Putin

The personal attacks on Putin are no different than the attacks on Iran ’s Ahmadinejad or Venezuela ’s Hugo Chavez. Any leader who has the temerity to control his nation’s own resources—and use them for the common good rather than enriching privately owned corporations—is the de facto enemy of the Empire. In truth, Putin is neither a tyrant nor an opponent of the United States . The criticism directed at him is mostly hot air. He’s demonized because he has used Russia ’s vast natural wealth to rebuild his country and to improve the standard of living for the Russian people. There’s nothing more to it.

Presently, Putin enjoys an 84% public approval rating—the highest rating of any world leader today. He has reduced poverty, stabilized the ruble, strengthened defense, deposed the rapacious “oligarchs” and restored Russia ’s international prestige. He is fiercely nationalistic and the Russian people admire him for it.

More importantly, Putin has successfully out-maneuvered Washington in every major energy deal since Bush took office in 2000. Even the invasion of Afghanistan- which was supposed to clear pipeline corridors for transporting resources from the Caspian Sea to Pakistan-has turned out to be a complete fiasco. The resurgent Taliban have ensured that the safe shipment of resources will be impossible for the foreseeable future. Also, setbacks in Afghanistan have exacerbated divisions in NATO which are causing the European allies to reconsider their involvement in the US-led mission. This is a dodgy predicament for Bush and Co. If NATO falls apart, the Transatlantic Alliance will probably unravel leaving America friendless in a world that is increasingly hostile to foreign adventurism.

While Bush is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan , Putin has continued to consolidate his power in Central Asia while making impressive inroads into Europe . In fact, Russia seems to have already won “The Great Game” of controlling Eurasia’s massive natural resources without even clashing with the US .

In this year alone, Russia has increased its “strategic dominance over Europe’s energy supplies while US-led efforts to promote energy diversity for Europe are faltering and the EU’s policies are in disarray.” (“Escaping Putin’s Energy Squeeze” Adrian Karatnycky)

In June, Russian energy giant Gazprom firmed up a deal with Italy to build a gas pipeline to southern Europe via the Black Sea sabotaging Washington ’s plan for a similar project called Nabucco.

At the same time, Putin has worked out deals with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to ship natural gas to Germany via a proposed pipeline under the Baltic Sea . And, just this week, the Russian oil giant Gazprom put the finishing touches on agreement with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to work-jointly on a gas pipeline project that will transport natural gas along the Caspian coast.

These deals represent huge commitments of resources which will put Washington at a disadvantage for decades to come. The US military has proved to be a much less effective tool in procuring dwindling resources than the “free market”.

The Bush administration has tried to exert greater control over Central Asian resources by building pipelines from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean . But the plan has failed miserably. Putin’s has out-flanked Washington at every turn. The ex-KGB alum has proved to be the superior capitalist leaving Bush with nothing to show for his efforts except a badly battered military.

Putin is also on friendly terms with Turkey and is pushing for “long term energy contracts for the Black Sea states”. The Turkish leadership shares Putin’s belief that the US should be kept from meddling in the region. This may explain why Dick Cheney is so mad at Putin and has even accused him of “blackmail”. But this is just “sour grapes”. In truth, Putin is just doing what the United States used to do—using free market competition to his best advantage.

What’s wrong with that?

An American energy specialist summarized America ’s defeat in the Eurasian Resource Wars saying:

“Western energy policies in Eurasia collapsed in May 2007. During this month, Russia seems to have conclusively defeated all Western-backed projects to bring oil and gas from Central Asia directly to Europe ... Cumulatively, the May agreements signify a strategic defeat of the decade-old US policy to open direct access to Central Asia ’s oil and gas reserves. By the same token they have nipped in the bud the European Union’s belated attempts since 2006 to institute such a policy.”

Putin’s greatest energy-coup may be the mega-deal he put together with the Austria earlier this year. According to M K Bhadrakumar (“A Pipeline into the Heart of Europe, Asia Times)

“Last September, Austria entered a long-term contract with Russia whereby Gazprom will meet 80% of Austria ‘s gas requirements of 9 billion cubic meters annually during the next 20-year period.” The project will involve “a massive gas-storage facility near Salzburg ”.... “which has an overall capacity of 2.4bcm. The facility is being built at a cost of 260 million euros (nearly US \$350 million) by Gazprom and, upon completion in 2011, will be the second-largest underground gas-storage facility in Central Europe ... (Putin has expanded) “ Austria ‘s role as a crucial gas-supply hub for transiting Russian gas to France , Italy and Germany in Western Europe; to Hungary in Central Europe; and to Slovenia and Croatia in the Balkans.”

Gazprom’s agreement with Austria is the death knell for the Washington-backed Nabucco gas pipeline project. It will be very difficult now for the major western energy giants to catch up with Russia and compete head-on in the European market. Putin caught them flat-footed once again. He has consolidated Eurasian oil and natural gas and established a central depot for distributing resources to consumers throughout Europe .

Game. Set. Match.

Russia is now the cat-bird’s seat peering over all of Europe and the Balkans as part of its energy fiefdom. Meanwhile Bush and his legions continue to toil away aimlessly in Mesopotamia .

Missile Defense is an expression of Washington ‘s frustration with its own failures. The Global Resource War (aka The War on Terror) has been so badly bungled that Bush will have to initiate “asymmetrical” strategies to counter Russia ‘s economic triumphs. We can expect that US-backed NGOs will continue funding troublemaking “pro democracy” groups inside Russia hoping to trigger a “color-coded” revolution in Moscow . At the same time, there will probably be a sudden outbreak of violence in Chechnya , after rebel-separatists have been “mysteriously” rearmed by foreign intelligence agencies. (Guess who?) The Bush administration will also try to strengthen their military position on Russia ‘s perimeter by pushing NATO into Ukraine and Georgia .

But, will any of these plans succeed?

Bush and his fellows will do whatever it takes to stop Russia from becoming the new century’s Energy Superpower. The “charm offensive” at Kennebunkport is just one part of America ‘s guerilla war on Putin. Missile Defense is another.

Welcome to the new Cold War.

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