

U.S.-Russia Relations:

Bush at Ljubljana: No Reagan at Reykjavik

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During their June 16 summit meeting in Ljubljana, U.S. President George Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin managed to dramatically improve the general tone of U.S.-Russian relations. The first quarter of the year witnessed an increase in hostile rhetoric by both nations, punctuated by diplomatic expulsions. The second quarter was a time of verbal reconciliation and promises of a constructive relationship. The word “partnership” even crept back into the dialogue. However, the summit must have been a major disappointment for those that expected more substance and fewer atmospherics. The five major issues in the bilateral relationship are national missile defense (NMD), NATO expansion, freedom of the press in Russia, the war in Chechnya, and economics. At the summit meeting this seemed to indicate their ranking in order of importance. If this is the case, this is bad news for both Russia and the United States. This is an indication that in Russia there is a continued obsession with Cold War issues and that the United States has perhaps written Russia off as an important nation beyond the clout delivered by its nuclear arsenal.

The Turnabout

Early in the year, Bush administration officials promised to be tough on Russia, and the Clinton administration’s record on Russia was continually criticized and even held up to ridicule. To paraphrase talk heard in Washington in January, though Russia is not an enemy, it is also not a strategic partner of the United States. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld seemed to personify the new administration’s policy toward Russia. When he ignored Putin’s national security chief Sergey Ivanov (now defense minister) at a February security conference in Germany, many interpreted this as an ominous sign of things to come. Early on, it was even suggested in Washington that Bush had nothing to say to Putin, therefore no meeting was on the agenda.

By May, however, the attitude in the United States seemed to change. Perhaps this change came about when Bush administration officials realized that building an NMD system and unilaterally abrogating the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) would alienate many allies in Europe. When Bush announced his intention to pursue a national missile defense system in his May 1 address in Washington, he reportedly phoned Putin beforehand to apprise him of the plans. This was reportedly seen as a conciliatory gesture in Moscow. Furthermore, the fact that the announcement was vague

and utterly lacking in details reassured many in Russia that the U.S. plan was still far from complete and that deployment was two decades or so away. Bush also dispatched emissaries Paul Wolfowitz from the Defense Department and Stephen Hadley from the National Security Council in an attempt to explain to Moscow U.S. plans. Though Russian leaders continued to insist that the ABM Treaty was the keystone of the Cold War arms agreements structure, at least the two sides began talking.

The rhetoric emanating from Moscow, though never as harsh as that coming from the U.S., also cooled down a bit during the spring. All through the harsh days of winter, Putin and his entourage had maintained a guarded civility when discussing the United States. The Russian press was slower in following this line, but by May the change was evident. A columnist for the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* asked, "Is there any alternative to cooperation?" Another article in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* suggested that discussions over NMD could bring the two sides closer together. *Izvestia* proclaimed that the "devil is in the details" of NMD, and explained that the United States was a long way off from convincing its European allies and from deployment, suggesting that Russia had little to fear. They were reassured when Sen. Carl Levin, the new Democratic head of the Armed Services Committee, hinted to a reporter from *The New York Times* that the NMD system was unlikely to make much headway during Bush's term of office.

During his mid-June tour of Europe, President Bush stated, "Russia is not the enemy of the United States. The Cold War is over, and the mentality that used to grip our nations during the Cold War must end." Bush was speaking of the need to move past the ABM Treaty, a "relic of the Cold War." However, many of the new leaders in the Kremlin are still hung up on Russia's past and are loath to exit the Cold War structure that afforded Russia (or the Soviet Union) so much clout.

President Putin no doubt experienced a bit of *schadenfreude* witnessing the Europeans' resistance to any unilateral deployment of an NMD system. Russian leaders suspect that they might be able to get something out of the deployment of an NMD system. In fact, the idea was already floated that the United States may purchase Russian-built S-300 surface-to-air missiles as part of a system constructed with European and Russian assistance. There is also talk that the United States may write off part of Russia's debt in exchange for an agreement to modify or abolish the ABM Treaty.

Russian leaders, however, are aware that they are unlikely to have much leverage over NATO expansion because it has been uniformly welcomed across Europe. It appears that in 2002 at least two of the Baltic republics (Lithuania and Estonia) will be asked to join. There is little Russia can do about this, particularly when a majority of the former Soviet republics have expressed interest in joining NATO as well. Russia's plan now seems to hinge on Russia gaining membership one day. Though Russian leaders know this is far into the future, they can gain an acknowledgement from the West that this is at least possible.

Some observers in the West have concluded that President Bush failed to establish the high ground in his meeting with Putin and was outmaneuvered by the crafty ex-KGB

agent. This was the conclusion reached by both *The New York Times* and the *Financial Times*. *The New York Times* suggested that Putin threw Bush across the judo mat at Ljubljana. A column in the *Moscow Times* suggested that if the summit was judged such a great success by both sides, then relations truly have deteriorated over the past several years. Critics argue that Bush should have gone into the summit with a clearly defined agenda, and he should have stuck by the agenda and not worried about atmospherics.

Clearly both leaders judged the summit a success, and it is no doubt important to establish a friendly rapport, especially so early in the two administrations. It was in fact a public relations exercise. But many argue that Putin came away the winner, as he avoided tough questions on Chechnya and freedom of the press in Russia, while putting off a Bush announcement that NMD was to go ahead for sure. Putin also warned later that if the United States were to unilaterally abrogate the ABM Treaty, all arms control agreements would be null and void. He also suggested as a response that Russia would enhance its MIRV capabilities. Putin came away seeming to be a forceful and decisive leader, while Bush hardly seemed the president of the greatest power on earth. Bush's own Republican colleagues in the Senate even questioned his judgment and his performance at Ljubljana.

Former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev has written about the Reykjavik summit of 1986, the first summit between then U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev, which at the time was seen as a failure. Gorbachev describes how Reagan came in with a clear agenda and how he stayed with it. Though no agreement on nuclear arms reduction was reached and both leaders left disappointed, Gorbachev came away with a clear admiration for Reagan's will and a clear understanding of where the Soviet Union needed to go in order to meet the U.S. halfway. For those in the West who had hoped that George W. Bush would run his foreign policy like Ronald Reagan, the first summit was a sign that Bush at Ljubljana was no Reagan at Reykjavik.

The Eurasia Factor

Early in April, Secretary of State Colin Powell hosted peace talks in Key West, Florida between Azerbaijani President Haydar Aliyev and Armenian President Robert Kocharyan in an effort to settle the long-standing conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. U.S.-led peace talks are clearly linked to energy concerns and in particular to the proposed Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that originates in Azerbaijan. At first the Bush administration seemed disinclined to push the pipeline project, but after recent large finds in Kazakhstan and with the rise in fuel prices in the United States during the spring, the White House seems to be reconsidering.

Russia followed the talks with interest, and it too wishes to be included to protect the interests of Armenia, the country with whom it is closest in the Caucasus region. Russia is worried about U.S. attempts to become the regional peacemaker and power broker. This is understandable considering the fact that Russia's emasculated influence is really felt only in the former Soviet republics to the south.

Russia is also looking to be included in any peace-making efforts in the Middle East and the Balkans, also traditional Russian/Soviet spheres of interest. President Mohammad Khatami's election to a second term in Iran was a positive development for Washington, especially those who wish to normalize U.S.-Iranian relations. Russia will also carefully watch this development. Further to the east, India's tacit agreement to support U.S. efforts to develop an NMD system put Russia in an awkward position. Moscow's traditional ally seems inclined to further improve relations with Washington.

Much was written of the fact that Putin arrived at the summit in Ljubljana fresh from a meeting with Chinese President Jiang Zemin in Shanghai. In fact, Putin's trip to China was scheduled long before the decision was made to meet with Bush in Slovenia. The Shanghai Five summit was a continuation of an ongoing dialogue and joint effort by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, and now Uzbekistan to combat terrorism linked to separatist movements in each of the participating countries. This dialogue can be expected to continue for many years, even if joint action proves difficult to implement.

Many observers might have been reading too hard into the timing of the Putin trips to Shanghai and Ljubljana. Nevertheless, Russia wants to make clear to the West that it does have the China option. As an article in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* stated, Russia has strategic interests in the east and the west and is unlikely to abandon or favor one over the other. The question remains as to how China and Russia will respond to the deployment of an NMD system. Russia appears willing to bargain or to live with the fact, raising no more than a protest. For China an NMD or theater missile defense system (TMD) threatens not only its strategic arsenal, but also potentially the Taiwan equation. Russia could be expected to make more trouble were TMD to affect the situation in Chechnya. Similarly China is much less concerned about NATO expansion for obvious reasons. It remains to be seen whether Beijing and Moscow will continue to support each other's positions, even when they are not vital interests, and when doing so threatens to poison relations with Washington. Many feel that China and Russia will remain unified on these issues; others are less sure.

Japan has thrown a slight wrench in U.S. plans in the Pacific for NMD. Japan has heretofore been a proponent of TMD, but has always been less inclined to support outright a U.S. NMD system. In recent weeks, Japanese leaders have made statements to the fact that NMD was not on the Japanese agenda. Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and Foreign Minister Tanaka Makiko are both thought to hold personal doubts about an NMD system. Japan's chief of the Defense Agency Nakatani Gen made clear that Japan would not agree to help develop an NMD system, though it would continue research toward the development of a Pacific-based TMD system. This undoubtedly gives Moscow more confidence that it can bring the United States to the table for some sort of agreement. The Japanese pronouncements do little for China because TMD is equal to the task of NMD in the Pacific, as China's nuclear missile force is much smaller than Russia's force.

Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations

April-June 2001

Apr. 3, 2001: U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell convenes a meeting in Key West, Florida with Azerbaijani President Haydar Aliyev and Armenian President Robert Kocharyan to discuss the normalization of the long-standing conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Apr. 3-4, 2001: German Gref, Russia's minister for economic development and trade, visits Washington to meet with Bush administration officials and U.S. business leaders.

Apr. 5, 2001: U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld tells U.S. allies that the United States intends to deploy limited missile defense and that moving beyond the 1972 ABM treaty is "simply inescapable."

Apr. 6, 2001: It is announced that President Bush has nominated U.S. Ambassador to NATO Alexander Vershbow as the next ambassador to Russia. Vershbow is seen by many Russians as a hardliner in favor of further NATO expansion along Russia's borders.

May 1, 2001: In a speech at the National Defense University, President Bush outlines his plan to go ahead with the development of NMD despite international opposition. In a conciliatory gesture he phones Russian President Putin before the speech.

May 1-3, 2001: Russian Deputy PM and Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin visits Washington and New York where he meets with officials from the IMF, the World Bank, and from the Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill.

May 11, 2001: Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Assistant National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley arrive in Moscow to discuss U.S. missile defense plans.

May 16, 2001: The State Department announces that the bureau that covered former Soviet states will be folded into the European bureau, in an apparent downgrading of relations with Russia.

May 17-18, 2001: Russian FM Igor Ivanov in Washington for two days of meetings with his counterpart U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. Ivanov also meets briefly with President Bush.

May 25, 2001: Bush administration officials announce that the U.S. intends to offer Russia military aid, joint anti-missile exercises, and possible arms purchases to ease Russian objections to U.S. plans for a missile defense system.

June 5, 2001: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov warns that if the U.S. withdraws from the ABM Treaty, Russia will consider itself free from 32 other strategic security accords.

June 9, 2001: Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld holds talks at a meeting of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council at NATO headquarters in Brussels with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov on a new framework for U.S.-Russian relations. Rumsfeld also meets with the defense ministers of the Baltic republics and reassures them that Russia will have no veto over NATO expansion in the Baltics.

June 13, 2001: The Federal Security Service (FSB) reprimands a U.S. lecturer, Elizabeth Sweet, for asking her students at Omsk State University to prepare a report on the region's social and economic situation. The FSB worried that such information from "unofficial sources" could damage the "image and competitiveness of our businesses."

June 14, 2001: Shanghai Five summit convenes. Participants (China, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and new member Uzbekistan) discuss counter-measures against terrorism in the region, but they also issue a joint statement criticizing the proposed U.S. NMD system.

June 15, 2001: President Bush announces plans for NATO expansion in a major speech in Warsaw. In his speech Bush promises, "No more Yaltas."

June 16, 2001: In Ljubljana, Slovenia, Presidents Bush and Putin meet for the first time.

June 18, 2001: President Putin grants a long interview in the Kremlin with U.S. journalists. He gives a conflicting picture of his talks with President Bush and of his attitude toward the United States.

June 20, 2001: Conservative U.S. senators, led by Jessie Helms, criticize President Bush's "chumminess" with President Putin. Helms says the Russian is "far from deserving" of the praise Bush lavished upon him.

June 13-21, 2001: Adm. Dennis Blair, USCINCPAC, leads a delegation of military officers and specialists to Moscow, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok.