

US-Russian strains dominate Bush-Putin meeting in Bratislava

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President Bush's European tour ended as it had begun. Despite all the overt demonstrations of friendship between "George" and "Vladimir," the meeting between Bush and Russian President Putin in the Slovakian capital Bratislava could not mask the growing tensions between the two governments. Washington is demanding the subordination of Russia to US foreign policy interests and the complete opening up of the Russian economy to international capital.

Prior to the meeting, Bush stepped up Washington's efforts to isolate and weaken Russia and pry loose from its orbit former Soviet Republics and other regions historically within Moscow's sphere of influence. In a speech in Bratislava's main square, Bush praised the recent, US-backed and financed "democratic revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine that replaced regimes close to Russia with governments aligned with Washington. He then called for similar "democratic" change in Moldova and Belarus.

Putin had supported Bush's re-election and was one of the first to congratulate him on his victory. His calculations that a second Bush administration would collaborate with him in the name of the "war against terror" and leave him a free hand in Russia and the former Soviet republics has quickly proven to be completely mistaken.

Just days after Bush was returned to office, the US supported the so-called "orange revolution" in the Ukraine, which installed a pro-American regime. Then, the new US secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, labelled Belarus and Iran, Putin's most important allies in the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) and the Middle East respectively, as "outposts of tyranny."

Prior to the Bratislava summit, Bush had sharply attacked the Russian government. "For Russia to make progress as a European nation, the Russian government

must renew its commitment to democracy and the rule of law," Bush said. "We recognize that reform will not happen overnight. We must always remind Russia, however, that our alliance stands for a free press, a vital opposition, the sharing of power, and the rule of law. And the United States and all European countries should place democratic reform at the heart of their dialogue with Russia."

Putin rejected the criticism. "Naturally, the fundamental principles of democracy and the institutions of democracy must be adapted to the reality of today's life in Russia, to our traditions and history," he declared in a newspaper interview.

One week before the summit, Putin had demonstratively welcomed Hassan Rohani, Iran's chief negotiator in nuclear issues and secretary of Iran's National Security Council. Putin said he was convinced that the Iranian nuclear program served exclusively peaceful purposes. The US claims Iran is seeking to construct nuclear weapons. After his meeting with Putin, Rohani announced that the two countries would sign an accord to send spent nuclear fuel from Iran to Russia.

American sources expressed concern that Russia wanted to sell Syria S-400 surface-to-air missiles. This air defence system is apparently able to destroy targets that use radar-avoiding stealth technology. Russia insisted that the S-400 system was based on purely conventional weapons and was defensive in nature, and that there is presently no international arms embargo against Syria.

Syria and Iran are Russia's two most important allies in the Middle East. Moscow is now the biggest arms supplier to Tehran, including aircraft, submarines and tanks. The two countries also collaborate economically. Russia and Iran have agreed to build two hydroelectric

power plants in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan. The contract is valued at up to 380 million euros. They are also collaborating in the design, development and launching of the Iranian “Zohreh” satellite, signing a contract in January to this end worth some \$132 million. Russian firms are also involved in the Iranian energy sector.

Iran has the second largest reserves of gas and the fourth largest oil reserves in the world, and its location between the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf give it great strategic significance. Moreover, it has a modern infrastructure and pipeline system and is therefore an ideal transit route to bring oil and gas to the world market. A pro-American regime change in Tehran would bring world energy supplies even more firmly under US control.

Faced with American pressure, the Putin government is searching for international allies. At the same time, it is trying to prevent the US exercising too much control over the Russian economy.

At the end of last year, Putin struck an agreement with Japan to build a giant oil pipeline from Siberia to the Pacific coast, enabling Russian oil to be transported to Asia circumventing the Middle East. A major Sino-Russian military manoeuvre on Chinese territory is planned this year. Russia has also announced its intention to more than double the amount of oil it supplies to China, from 6.5 to 15 million tonnes, in 2006. China is now the second largest net importer of oil in the world, and, like Japan, is one of the largest purchasers of Iranian oil. Like Russia, it is also one of the most important arms suppliers to Tehran.

Russia, on the other hand, is the second largest oil producer in the world. Putin’s actions against the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky—whose Yukos corporation collaborated closely with American oil firms and who eventually financed opposition newspapers and organizations—evoked sharp protests from Washington. However, this did not prevent the Russian government from putting Khodorkovsky behind bars and bringing his corporation under state control through a compulsory auction.

According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Russia is planning to go even further. In future, foreign companies will be allowed only a minority holding in firms applying for licences to tap and extract strategic resources like oil and gas. This is one of the major

issues behind the dispute about “democracy and the rule of law” in Russia.

For a moment, this became visible at the joint press conference held by Bush and Putin in Bratislava. Like an elementary school teacher, the US president lectured Putin about the principles of democracy, praised the “frank, candid and constructive dialogue with my friend, Vladimir,” and declared Putin to be “fully committed” to building such a democracy. However, clearly referring to the Yukos affair, Putin concluded by emphasizing that democracy did not mean that “everybody can do whatever they want and rob the people.”

Bush claimed that there was more upon which the two agreed than disagreed. But the only concrete example he could give, aside from general statements about closer cooperation on economics and nuclear security, was an agreement about limiting the spread of “MANPADs” (Man Portable Air Defence Systems). Such weapons are often used against the US occupiers by resistance fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan. The agreement had been prepared by defence ministers long before.

Regarding Iran and North Korea, Bush declared himself in agreement with Putin that the two countries should “not possess nuclear weapons.” Russia, however, has always justified its supply of nuclear technology to Iran, which is opposed by Washington, with the claim that it only serves civilian purposes.

Bush did not even mention other points of dispute, like the sale of Russian air defence missiles to Syria.



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