

# Putin's speech to the nation: Tensions increase between the US and Russia

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The timing could have hardly been more apposite for addressing the increased tensions between Russia and the US. On May 10, one day after ceremonies to mark the 61st anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared in his annual speech to the nation, "The stronger our military is, the less temptation there will be to exert such pressure on us." He continued, "As the saying goes, Comrade Wolf knows whom to eat. He eats without listening and he's clearly not going to listen to anyone."

Putin was publicly formulating concerns of ruling circles in Moscow who see a growing threat in the increasing aggressiveness of the US. Putin went on to reproach Washington: "Where is all this pathos about protecting human rights and democracy when it comes to the need to pursue their own interests?"

He added that the worldwide arms race was not yet over. Quite the opposite, a "new technological level" had been reached internationally. The arms race was accelerating. He pointed out that the US defense budget was 25 times larger than that of Russia.

With regard to the controversy over Iran's nuclear program, Putin indirectly warned against the use of force. Such methods only rarely brought the desired success, he said.

Putin reacted in his speech to the increasingly hostile tone from Washington in recent months. Just a few days before, George W. Bush had accused Russia of "economic nationalism," declaring: "One of our concerns is economic nationalism, to a certain extent, where he [Putin] is using his oil companies to achieve what appear to be political objectives." Bush added, "And we make our concerns known when someone uses natural gas, for example, to send signals to governments."

Bush was referring to the gas conflict between Russia and Ukraine at the start of this year. The Russian Gazprom company had temporarily stopped gas supplies to Ukraine and doubled the preferential price which Ukraine had paid up to that time.

At the beginning of the month, US Vice President Dick Cheney attacked Russia in an unprecedented manner in the course of his tour of former Soviet republics. He accused

Russia of "backward steps in the democracy process," charging it with deliberately using energy supplies to restrict the rights of persons living in nearby states and undermining the territorial integrity of its neighbors. Moscow, Cheney continued, had sought to influence what he called democratic movements in these countries.

This line of argument marks a new high point in tensions between Russia and the US. Never before since the collapse of the Soviet Union has a US president or vice president so openly threatened Russia. Up until now, the White House has generally emphasized the existence of "friendly" relations, while threats and accusations were left to the Pentagon, various think tanks, or second-rank officials.

The aggressive attitude adopted by the US government is part of a policy of the American ruling elite to secure international dominance over all important resources and markets. It is not prepared to tolerate any strengthening of regional powers which could challenge US dominance, and is trying ever more openly, including by military means, to prevent the emergence of powerful regional rivals.

The US increasingly sees Russia precisely as such a threat. The Russian ruling elite has worked for years in its own reactionary way to oppose the attempts by the US to impose its hegemony in the former sphere of influence of the Soviet Union.

In reaction to the US-led war against Serbia, a traditional ally of Russia, and the manipulated regime-change in Belgrade that followed, influential layers of the Russian ruling elite began a reorientation of their policies. They understood that the US would not be satisfied with the dissolution of the USSR and would try to further reduce the influence of the largest state to emerge from the collapse of the Soviet Union—Russia itself.

Forces began to emerge in the Russian elite which saw a strong state as the only possible way of protecting the structures of post-Soviet rule and maintaining Russia's spheres of interest in the face of increasing pressure from the US.

Under the clans of oligarchs—the owners of former state wealth and property—a reorientation of the old security structures of the secret service and army began, aiming at the creation of a state along Chinese lines. In China, a new capitalist layer has been created under the strict control of the

Communist Party and out of the party itself. This elite imposes its own brutal methods of exploitation, enabling the country to emerge as an independent force on the world market and a rival of the established great powers.

The creation of such a Russian state, they concluded, required men with the background and capabilities of Vladimir Putin and his ilk. Putin is a living embodiment of the links between the old Soviet security apparatus and the new clans of oligarchs.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin had worked for 15 years in the Soviet foreign secret service. From 1990 to 1996 he was the most important advisor and right-hand man of the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoli Sobchak, who oversaw the orgy of self-enrichment by local oligarchs in Russia's second largest city. He is widely considered to rank among the most corrupt political figures of this time.

Following Sobchak's failure to win reelection in 1996, Putin returned to the secret service, and in 1998 assumed the leadership of the Federal Security Agency (FSB), the successor organization to the Soviet-era KGB. In 1999, Putin was selected by the outgoing president Boris Yeltsin as the new prime minister, and in 2000 Putin took over from Yeltsin as president.

Putin began by filling important posts with secret service and army personnel, gradually stifling the independence of the media and, above all, organizing a new division of labor with the oligarchs: the oligarchs were allowed to maintain control over the economy, while the army and secret service were responsible for political leadership.

Oligarchs who opposed this state of affairs were eliminated or largely stripped of their influence. Among the first targets were the media moguls Boris Beresovsky and Vladimir Gussinsky, who were sent into exile and whose media empires were broken up. The oil billionaire Michael Khodorkovsky has been sitting in a Siberian prison for the past two years.

The core of the new policy was a renewal state control over Russia's most important resources, particularly oil and gas. In view of rapidly rising worldwide demand, these resources represent the most important basis for the Russian economy and thus the most important lever of power in the hands of the Kremlin.

The leadership of the Gazprom company was replaced to increase its subordination to the state. In the oil industry, the national Rosneft company was strengthened by the incorporation of Khodorkovsky's oil company Yuganskneftegas. The oil company Sibneft, owned by the oligarch Roman Abramovich, was affiliated to Gazprom.

As a result of the rise in energy prices and the strengthening of state control, Russia has changed from a debtor to a creditor nation and amassed currency reserves that rank among the highest in the world.

Russia is attempting to exploit its renewed economic clout by developing closer relations with China, in particular, in order to

profit from that country's huge energy demands and acquire a powerful ally. For some years, different scenarios have been developed for the laying of oil and gas pipelines from Russia to China and also Japan. This could further assist Russia in regaining influence in the former southern republics of the USSR. The US has already had to vacate its military bases in Uzbekistan and may be forced to close its base in Kyrgyzstan.

This has led to increasing concern not only in the US, but also in Europe. The US sees its interests in the southern countries of the former Soviet Union endangered. This is a region which, one year ago, began transporting Central Asian oil from Azerbaijan via Georgia to the world market, bypassing Russia and Iran. At the same time, the US feels threatened by any further strengthening of the economic giant China.

Europe, which is dependent to a large extent on energy supplies from Russia, fears a further increase in prices and cuts in Russian supplies, which Moscow intends to sell more lucratively to Asia.

This is the background to the increased aggressiveness on the part of the US and also Europe. In 2003, the US organized the toppling of the Georgian government and one year later the government of Ukraine, replacing both regimes by more pro-US variants. A similar attempt to do the same in Belarus failed this spring, although in this case the opposition was also closely supported by the European side.

Alexander Rahr, the Russia expert of the German Foreign Policy Society, summed up the fears of a Russian alliance with China and India capable of blockading oil and gas to the rest of the world. Such an alliance, he explained, would become "a second 'pole' in the World Order of the twenty-first century."

This is the result which the US is seeking to prevent. Only recently did it become clear how feverish these preparations are. According to a recent report in the American journal *Foreign Affairs*, new technical developments mean that the US has overwhelming nuclear superiority. The US is now able to carry out a first strike against all countries possessing nuclear weapons—e.g., Russia or China—and destroy almost all of their retaliatory capacity at one stroke.

Sixty-one years after the end of the Second World War, mankind faces a relapse into a period of violent international relations. The working class must develop its own socialist policy on an international level to oppose the "wolves" in both Washington and Moscow. The alternative "socialism or barbarism" is increasingly posed as a life-and-death question for all humanity.



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