# Russian President Putin lambastes US foreign policy

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Just a few hours after the opening of this year's 43rd annual Munich Conference on Security Policy, the organization's motto of "peace through dialogue" proved to be worth less than the paper it was printed on. Instead, the word "drumbeat" was the one most frequently heard to describe the proceedings, while others spoke of a "fiery speech" and even of a "new Cold War."

The reactions followed an address by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who launched a sharp attack on US foreign policy. In one of the most vociferous criticisms of Washington publicly voiced by any head of a major power, the Russian president declared that American foreign policy was "very dangerous" in its " uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts."

Putin told his audience, including the new US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman, and other senior Washington officials, that American imperialism had "overstepped its national borders in every way."

In a clear reference to the US debacle in Iraq, Putin stated that "unilateral illegal actions have not resolved any single problem; they have become a hotbed of further conflicts."

The Russian president continued: "We are seeing increasing disregard for the fundamental principles of international law . . . No one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them. Of course such a policy stimulates an arms race. The dominance of force inevitably encourages a number of countries to acquire weapons of mass destruction."

In an interview with the Arab television station Al-Dschasira, Putin compared what he termed the "hundreds of persons," who had died at the hands of the deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to the number who had died since the invasion of Iraq in 2003: "3,000 Americans killed, while the number of dead Iraqis totals—according to various estimations—hundreds of thousands."

Criticising Washington's efforts to secure its position as the sole superpower by military means, Putin asked, "What is a unipolar world? However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one centre of authority, one centre of force, one centre of decision-making.

"It is world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within."

In a barb aimed at his critics in Washington who have used the growth of authoritarianism under his presidency to justify a harsher policy towards Russia, Putin stated that US hegemony "has nothing in common with democracy."

"We are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves," he said.

Putin bluntly accused Washington of pursuing military policies aimed directly against Russia. With regard to the planned stationing of an American anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic he said, "They are trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us," and he threatened counter measures: "We know that they [the US] are working on an anti-missile defence system. And that thereby our nuclear armed forces could possibly be neutralized. Russia, however, has the weapons, which can overcome the system."

Putin also recalled the guarantees given to the Soviet Union in 1990 by then NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner—i.e., that the North Atlantic alliance would not station any troops east of the German border. "Where are these guarantees today?" Putin asked, referring to a total of 10,000 NATO troops stationed in military camps in Bulgaria and Romania.

Despite the harsh tone of his criticism, Putin's spokesman stressed that the speech was "not about confrontation, it's an invitation to think." In subsequent comments to the press, Putin himself pointed to his personal friendship with President Bush, whom he described as a "decent man."

Putin's open breach of diplomatic norms at the world's most prestigious international defence and security forum can only be understood in the context of US preparations for war against Iran.

In December, following the political defeat suffered by Bush's Republican Party in the US midterm elections and the publication of the Baker-Hamilton report, hopes flourished in Moscow as well as the capitals of Western Europe that Washington would return to foreign policies based on international co-operation and diplomacy, instead of the unilateral use of military force. Instead, the opposite scenario has developed. The US has not only increased its troop numbers in Iraq, but is also preparing a military strike against Iran.

Virtually on a daily basis, the US establishment directs new charges and claims against Iran. Most recently, unnamed US officials have made unsubstantiated claims that Teheran is supplying Shiite rebels with weapons to kill US troops in neighbouring Iraq.

This entire propaganda exercise recalls the run-up to the Iraq war, in which blatant falsifications and absurd lies were pumped out over months in order to establish a basis for the invasion and conquest of the country.

It is in this connection that one must see the significance of US demands for more troops in the south of Afghanistan and the "spring offensive" against Taliban rebels announced by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Afghanistan shares a border of nearly 1,000 kilometres with Iran, and the expansion of military operations together with the "clearing" of the terrain in Afghanistan represents a further step in preparations for war with Teheran.

Moscow has repeatedly bowed to US demands that it pressure Iran into complying with Washington's aggressive dictates regarding Tehran's nuclear programs. Russia itself is seeking to prevent Iran from developing into an influential regional power, fearful that an increase in power for the Mullah's regime would strengthen Islamic forces in the Russian border regions and central Asia.

In the course of his Munich speech, Putin again largely backed the US

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position of increasing pressure on Teheran over its nuclear program: "I don't understand why Iran has not responded positively and constructively to these [nuclear] concerns and the proposals by International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed El Baradei that would address these concepts."

An American military strike against Iran, however, would be a nightmare for Russia. On the one hand, vast economic interests are involved. In January, Teheran signed a deal to buy 83 Russian passenger planes. Such large orders for Russian manufacturing are of considerable importance under conditions in which Russia's high economic growth is almost exclusively tied to the export of energy and raw materials.

Russia also has a leading role in the construction of Iran's disputed nuclear reactor program. Delivery of the necessary nuclear fuels is planned for March, and the reactor is due to be completed for linkage to the Iranian electricity network in October.

The principal interests at stake, however, are of a strategic character. An attack on Iran would virtually complete the encirclement of Russia, which Washington has been systematically pursuing since 1991 as part of its strategy for world power. Most of the former Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact (the post-war military alliance dominated by the Soviet Union), have in the meantime joined NATO. Governments aligned with Washington were brought to power in Ukraine and Georgia by means of US-backed "revolutions." Afghanistan and Iraq, both formerly part of the Soviet sphere of influence, are now occupied by US troops. Iran is one of the last countries in the region in which Washington exerts negligible influence.

The bluntness of Putin's speech, therefore, was an expression of Moscow deepening anxiety over the role of US militarism and the growing dominance of Washington's nuclear capabilities over those of Russia. It also expressed Moscow's renewed confidence on the world arena, based on the wealth flowing into the state treasury from high oil and gas revenues and the growing ability of the Kremlin to use the vast energy resources at its disposal to exert political pressure on its allies and rivals.

Putin was quite conscious that his criticisms of Washington would find a resonance in conference dominated by European security officials. His speech was sharply criticised by American conference delegates, but the reaction of their European counterparts—whose governments have held back from open criticism of Washington—was remarkably mild.

The White House declared it was "surprised and disappointed," and that the charges made by Putin were "false." Senator John McCain, a likely Republican presidential candidate in 2008, blasted Moscow for taking an "autocratic turn" and charged that its foreign policy is "opposed to the principles of the Western democracies."

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates declared that common problems and challenges must be handled "in partnership with other countries including Russia," but expressed surprise that Russia seemed "to partly work against international stability," through "weapon supplies or the attempts to use energy resources as a source of political pressure." NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer declared Putin's comments to be "disappointing."

The German government, however, made a point of asserting that Putin's speech should not be regarded as a "relapse into the Cold War." A government spokesman in Berlin described the meeting in Munich as a tried and tested framework for such an open discussion.

The co-ordinator for German-Russian co-operation, Andreas Shockenhoff (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), praised Putin for opening up a public and critical discussion while making a number of constructive proposals. The chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the German parliament, Ruprecht Polenz (CDU), stated that Putin had raised legitimate concerns, and Social Democratic defence spokesman Rainer Arnold commented that, while Putin's speech flouted usual diplomatic niceties, he was justifiably disturbed by the stationing of missiles and additional US soldiers close to the Russian border.

French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Foreign Minister Douste Blazy had criticized US Middle East policy prior to the Munich conference. They demanded a date for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and demanded that Iran and Syria be included in any solution of the region's conflicts.

Along with Russia, the German and French governments fear the consequences of a US military strike against Iran. Both countries have extensive economic ties with Iran and strategic interests at stake. Trade with Iran is flourishing with the active support of European states.

In the first half of 2006, goods valued at 2.3 billion euros were exported to the Islamic Republic. In 2005, the German government granted a total of 5.4 billion euros for Iranian trade and business. This figure was only exceeded by Italy. Iran also has broad trade links with France, its second most important business partner in the European Union after Germany.

During her Middle East trip last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel conducted a form of diplomacy aimed at preventing any abrupt US military action against Iran by establishing numerous bilateral pacts and relations. Berlin does not dare to take an open stand against its powerful US partner.

Although Putin's criticisms of Washington are entirely justified, they should not be confused with a progressive or even pacifist criticism of the Bush administration's criminal policy.

Many of the accusations made by Putin could be equally addressed to the policy of his own regime. The second Chechnya war, which took place under Putin's presidency, cost the lives of hundreds of thousands—according to independent estimates one quarter of the Chechen population has been wiped out.

Russia's internal situation is characterized by a turn to authoritarian forms of rule and spiralling social divisions. While the wealth of a narrow layer of oligarchs defies description, the mass of the ordinary population is conducting a daily struggle to survive.

Putin is attacking Washington from the standpoint of Russia's interests as a great power, i.e., the interests of the ruling layer of oligarchs. The same criteria apply to European governments, which are also defending their own imperialist interests. This also determines the methods they employ. They react to American militarism by rattling their own sabres and expanding their international military operations.

On February 8, Russia's Defence minister Sergei Ivanov announced a large increase in the Russian defence budget, with an extra $189 billion to be spent over the next eight years to improve military infrastructure, including a new generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear submarines and improvements to its early-warning radar system.

Addressing the Russian parliament, Ivanov announced that the military would get many more ballistic missiles this year compared with recent years. He also stated that Russia planned to deploy 34 new silo-based Topol-M missiles and control units and 50 such missiles mounted on mobile launchers by 2015.

Such attempts to expand the Kremlin's nuclear arsenal and improve its manoeuvrability are clearly motivated by Washington's provocative missile shield, whose only credible targets are Russia and China. With a military budget just one-twentieth the size of the Pentagon's, Moscow is attempting to develop mechanisms to maintain a functioning nuclear retaliatory capability in the face of Washington's increasingly sophisticated ability to strike and disable more fixed Russian nuclear missile batteries.

The situation increasingly recalls the start of the last century when mounting tensions between imperialist powers finally exploded in the form of the slaughter of the First World War. A war against Iran would utterly destabilise the entire international power structure. Not only would such a war inflict horrors upon the population of the entire region—it

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would inevitably lead to direct confrontations between major powers with strategic interests in the region.

The fight against imperialism and war can only be carried out on the basis of an international movement of the working class. Its aim must be overcoming the capitalist system worldwide, which threatens to once again plunge mankind into the abyss of war and reaction.

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