

On eve of G-8 summit

Tensions between US and Russia erupt in mutual recriminations

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In the run-up to this week's Group of 8 summit of industrialized nations in Germany, tensions between the United States and Russia have led to an extraordinary series of public clashes on issues ranging from a US plan to install interceptor missiles and radar stations in Eastern Europe, to a US and European-backed push for Kosovan independence, to Washington's arms shipments to Lebanon, to Russian President Vladimir Putin's crackdown against oppositionist forces within Russia.

The public statements on both sides reflect a growing confrontation resulting from the United States' aggressive policy of containing Russian influence and asserting US power in former Soviet republics and spheres of influence in both Central Asia and Eastern Europe, and the drive of the Russian regime, emboldened by rising oil revenues and Washington's debacle in Iraq, to realize its aspirations as a regional and world power.

The harshness of the rhetoric—with the Bush administration accusing Russia of “bullying” its neighbors and using “ham-fisted” and “strong-arm” methods, and top Russian officials denouncing American “imperialism” and accusing Washington of starting a “new arms race”—is a sign of the tense and volatile state of relations that prevail not only between these two countries, but on a global scale.

At a press conference on May 30, following a meeting of the G-8 foreign ministers in Potsdam, Germany, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov denounced US plans to build a missile shield over former Warsaw Pact countries that involves the installation of ten missiles in Poland and radar stations in the Czech Republic, accusing the US of launching a new arms race.

Lavrov also suggested that Russia might veto a United Nations Security Council resolution drafted by the US and backed by Western European governments that would recognize the independence of Kosovo from Russia's traditional ally, Serbia.

Something of a pall fell over the room when Rice countered Lavrov's attack on the missile shield plan by quipping that Russian officials themselves “have bragged that Russia's strategic defense systems can easily overwhelm any missile defense system that the US puts up in Europe.

“I hope that no one has to prove that Condi is right about that,” Lavrov interjected.

The following day, Putin gave a press conference in which he reprised his February, 2007 characterization of American foreign policy as “imperialist,” and repeated Moscow's claim that Washington was starting a new arms race by building a missile shield in Europe. He noted that Russia had just tested a new intercontinental ballistic missile and said the test was in response to the US missile defense system.

Also on Thursday, Russian ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, rejected a revised draft of the Kosovo resolution, saying the revision had “not changed anything.” US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad responded by

saying the US would push for a vote next week.

The same day, following a meeting in Germany of the Middle East “Quartet” (the US, Russia, the European Union and the UN), Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov attacked Washington's massive arms shipments to Lebanon in the midst of the Lebanese army's bloody assault on a Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli.

Rice used a speech in Postdam to describe the American-Russian relationship as one of “cooperation and competition, of friendship and friction,” a stark departure from previous characterizations of the relationship as one of full partnership.

Newsweek magazine published an article quoting “a senior Bush administration official” as saying Russia is “slowly becoming a revisionist power, seeking to revisit the settlements of '89 and '91” that ended the cold war.

In the midst of these public recriminations, the White House announced that Putin would spend two days in meetings with Bush July 1-2 at the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine.

This announcement, however, did not signal a retreat by Washington from its aggressive policy toward Moscow. On Thursday night, a US State Department official, speaking with the explicit approval of the Bush administration, gave a lengthy speech to the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs clearly intended as an official rejoinder to Russian criticisms of US foreign policy.

Entitled “Where is Russia Heading,” the speech by David Kramer, deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, accused Russia of provocative and aggressive behavior toward its neighbors, refusal to abide by international agreements, and authoritarian practices within its borders.

Kramer did note cooperation between the two countries on “counterterrorism and non-proliferation,” citing Iran and North Korea as positive examples, and including Afghanistan.

However, he made clear that the Bush administration intended to pursue its policy of thwarting Russian interests and promoting pro-Western governments in former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia, supporting Kosovo independence, integrating former Soviet republics into NATO, and building its missile shield in Eastern Europe.

He further signaled that the US and its European allies would seek to use the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to intervene in upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia. The OSCE's election monitoring agency, working in tandem with US-financed “pro-democracy” non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has used ballot irregularities, real and merely alleged, to overturn the election of pro-Russian regimes in Georgia and Ukraine.

Kramer also criticized a recent agreement between Russia and the former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan

on natural gas supplies, asserting US prerogatives in controlling the vast oil and natural gas resources of the Caspian Basin.

The importance to which the Bush administration attached Kramer's speech was underscored by a front-page article published June 1 by the *New York Times*, prior to the official release of the text, describing its contents.

"An advance copy of the speech was provided by an administration official," the *Times* noted, "who wanted to make sure Mr. Kramer's remarks received broad attention."

Much of Kramer's speech was devoted to an attack on the Putin regime's increasingly brutal assault on democratic rights. Here the US spokesman was able to cite Moscow's record of suppressing oppositional parties and dissident groups, which expresses the reactionary nationalist character of the Putin regime and the oligarchic elite in whose interests it rules. Moscow's drive for greater influence and power outside its borders has been accompanied by an increasingly brazen assault on democratic rights within the country.

However, the Bush administration has absolutely no standing as a supposed proponent of democracy, having done more than any previous government in US history to attack democratic rights and assert quasi-dictatorial powers within the US. At the same time, Washington's purported pursuit of democracy internationally is belied by its support for dictatorial regimes that serve Washington's foreign policy objectives, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf emirates and Pakistan, to name a few.

Particularly in Eastern Europe, Washington has clothed its expansionist aims in the trappings of "democracy" and utilized US-financed "pro-democracy" forces, inevitably led by disaffected elements of the old regimes, to topple governments aligned with Russia and install regimes in tune with US foreign policy interests and supportive of "free market" economic policies, i.e., opening up their markets and resources to exploitation and control by American corporate and financial interests. Such were the experiences of the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine and the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia.

Kramer unequivocally defended the role of the OSCE in monitoring elections in Russia's neighboring countries. Noting that Putin last February denounced the OSCE as a "vulgar instrument designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries," Kramer said, "The administration strongly defends the OSCE's mandate to advance democratic reforms, including election monitoring ... In fact, we look forward to the OSCE's involvement in monitoring the conduct of Russia's upcoming Duma elections in December 2007 and presidential elections in March 2008."

He attacked a recent Russian law on NGOs operating in the country and noted, "President Bush, when he was in St. Petersburg last summer, hosted an event with NGO and civil society leaders, sending a powerful message of American support and solidarity. Just this month, Secretary Rice took part in Moscow in a roundtable discussion with leaders of civil society and other figures."

In his indictment of Moscow's increasing internal repression, he spoke of police attacks on recent oppositional demonstrations and a growing assault on journalists, noting the murders of Paul Klebnikov and Anna Politkovskaya. He added that the US supported British demands for the extradition of former secret service agent Andrey Lugovoy, whom Britain has indicted for the poisoning murder in London of Russian expatriate and Putin critic Aleksandr Litvinenko.

"Simply put," he said, "a vigorous, independent and probing media is indispensable in a democracy." As is the case with all such US government proclamations, it is hypocritical to the core, coming from the representative of a country whose corporate-owned media functions as an unofficial propaganda arm of the government.

No less hypocritical was Kramer's warning on the upcoming Russian

elections: "That all this is happening, that Russia is regressing in these areas, ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections, may not be entirely coincidental. The Kremlin is bringing its full weight to bear in shaping the environment in favor of its preferred outcome. *What is most disturbing is the apparently selective use of the law to disadvantage a number of political parties, for instance by precluding their registration and thus their ability to put forth candidates.*" [Emphasis added].

Without minimizing the anti-democratic policies of the Kremlin, it is necessary to note that Kramer's description of Russian elections could be applied virtually verbatim to the anti-democratic laws, regulations and practices that are used to marginalize or bar independent and third-party candidates from the electoral process in the US, in order to uphold the American two-party duopoly.

In regard to post-Soviet Russia itself, Washington's supposed support for democratic processes and political freedom is belied by its political record. In 1993, the US supported and helped coordinate the shelling of the Russian parliament building by then-President Boris Yeltsin. The bloody assault was carried out to crush oppositionist forces in the legislature. Washington also intervened in a massive way both financially and politically in Russian elections in the 1990s to "shape the environment" to favor of its pliant ally, Yeltsin.

On Russian foreign policy, Kramer denounced Moscow's "intransigence" over the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Russia is demanding that a revised version of the treaty be adopted, but the US and NATO insist that Russia first withdraw its military forces from Georgia and Moldova.

He denounced Russia's support for the "corrupt, separatist regime in Moldova's Transnistria region" as well as its backing for separatist regimes in Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions.

"The United States continues to call on Russia to end its support for separatists," he declared, and proceeded to attack Moscow for opposing Albanian separatists in Kosovo.

"We see Kosovo as sui generis—a set of circumstances not found in any other conflict," he said, and added ominously, "and we also hope that Russia does not invoke Kosovo as a basis for intervention in other places along its borders—for that would be a most dangerous game to play."

He criticized Russian actions toward the Baltic States Lithuania and Estonia, which were formerly part of the USSR. In particular, he deplored Russia's "heavy-handed approach" toward Estonia.

He condemned Russia's "proclivity to use energy as a political and/or economic lever against neighbors," citing Moscow's cutoff of energy supplies to Ukraine in 2006 and Belarus this year.

On the US missile defense plan, Kramer repeated Washington's mantra that the program "poses no threat whatsoever" to Russia and is intended to protect Europe from attack by the likes of Iran and North Korea. He went so far as to invoke Rice's characterization of Russian fears as "purely ludicrous."

In fact, as Kramer well knows, the erection of an anti-missile shield in the heart of Russia's former sphere of influence is a highly aggressive and provocative measure that would undermine the existing balance of nuclear forces to Russia's disadvantage. Nor can any sane political leader take as good coin Washington's protestations of friendly intentions.

The proposed missile shield is only one piece in a puzzle that includes the establishment of US military bases in former Soviet Central Asian Republics and the stationing of US and NATO forces in former Warsaw Pact countries within easy striking distance of Russia. Last February, Putin cited 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. Putin asked where these guarantees are today, pointing to a total of 10,000 NATO troops stationed in military camps in Bulgaria and Romania.

In the course of his remarks, Kramer touched on the real economic and

geo-strategic aims that lie behind Washington's democratic rhetoric. In opening, he alluded to the type of interests represented in his audience. Russia's evolution "gives pause," he said, "to those who would want to invest there or do business with it, which probably includes many of you as well ..."

He noted that US investment in Russia rose by 50 percent in 2005 and that "many of our top companies are increasing their stake in the Russian Federation." He added, "[T]he Russian market has been an incredibly lucrative one in recent years."

He continued, "Russia holds the world's largest natural gas reserves; second largest coal reserves and seventh largest oil reserves. It is the largest exporter of natural gas and it is tied with Saudi Arabia as the world's largest oil exporter. Energy is literally fueling Russia's economic growth and growing Russian confidence and assertiveness."

He then focused on two major concerns of the US financial and corporate elite: control of oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Basin and greater access to Russian internal markets, particularly its vast energy resources.

Of the former, he spoke of a "particular focus on the Caspian region as a key source of diversified supplies of oil and natural gas" and stressed the need for "reliable, long-term flows of natural gas from the Caspian region to European markets."

He cited as a troubling development a declaration issued last month by the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan pledging to cooperate on increasing natural gas exports from Central Asia to Russia.

"The presidents' statement," he said, "points up the fact that the Caspian region is ripe for further development. For us and Europe, the key question is what form this further development will take. Clearly, Russia will be a player in Central Asia's energy sector. We believe that Central Asian countries would be wise to court more than one customer."

On the question of US access to Russian resources and markets, he issued a thinly veiled warning against the Putin regime's policy of strengthening state control. "We are concerned about trends here," he said. "The Russian government will have to address its decision to exert more state control over strategic industries"



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