

# Putin, Bush talks fail to dispel mounting tensions

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In a brief but tense summit at the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine, Russian President Vladimir Putin blindsided his American counterpart George W. Bush for the second time in less than a month.

Both US and Russian officials had agreed in the run-up to the encounter, which lasted less than 24 hours, that no new substantive proposals would be put forward by either side. The Bush administration in particular was anxious to dispel any expectations of a breakthrough on any of the multiple geo-strategic issues that have escalated the conflict between Washington and Moscow to the sharpest level since the end of the Cold War nearly two decades ago.

However, Putin used the meeting—which he had requested—to expand on the surprise proposal he floated at last month’s G8 summit to transform a proposal to set up a US-built missile shield in the former Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe into a joint US-Russian project to be based at a Russian military installation in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

Both the initial proposal made in Germany last month and the amplified version put forward at the seaside resort in Maine are aimed at undercutting US attempts to militarily encircle Russia.

Following a brief fishing outing with Bush and his father, former president George H.W. Bush, the US president delivered a description of the talks with Putin that could not have been more non-committal.

“We had a good, casual discussion on a variety of issues,” said Bush. “You know, through the course of our relationship there have been times when we’ve agreed on issues and there’s been times when we haven’t agreed on issues. But one thing I’ve found about Vladimir Putin is that he is consistent, transparent, honest and is an easy man to discuss our opportunities and problems with.”

Putin, however, tried to put a more positive spin on the talks, declaring that he and Bush had “discussed basically the entire gamut of both bilateral issues and international issues.” He added, “We are seeking the points of coincidence in our positions and very frequently we do find

them.”

The response of the two to questions, however, made it clear that this “coincidence” in US and Russian positions had not brought the two sides any closer to a concrete agreement on the main points of contention.

Asked if he had been able to convince Putin to back beefed-up United Nations economic sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, Bush responded, “I am concerned about the Iranians’ attempt to develop the technologies, know-how to develop a nuclear weapon. The President shares that—I’m a little hesitant to put words in his mouth, but I think he shares that same concern.”

Putin, for his part, merely stated his commitment to continuing to deal with the Iranian nuclear question in the UN Security Council—presumably as opposed to US unilateral military action—and cited “positive data and information” coming out of talks between Iran with European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana and with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Russia—unlike the US—has significant economic interests in Iran, involved not only in its oil and nuclear power industries, but also in the sale of conventional weapons, aircraft and other manufactured goods to the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, Moscow has its own complex political relations with Teheran, seeing a US war against Iran as an intolerable strategic threat, while at the same time coming into conflict with the Islamic Republic over its regional ambitions, which in part threaten to animate political Islam in Russia’s own border territories as well as in former Soviet regions of Central Asia.

At a recent conference in Teheran of the five nations bordering the Caspian Sea this complicated relationship found expression in a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who declared that Russia was the only one of the five that possessed the military capacity to defend the region against “the greed and ambitions of hostile outsiders.”

The growing unease in Moscow over the steady expansion

of US military influence in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia under the pretext of combating terrorism has been sharply heightened by the US missile shield proposal.

The Bush administration put forward the plan to deploy anti-missile batteries in Poland together with radar tracking facilities in the Czech Republic as a supposed defensive shield against attacks by “rogue states,” particularly Iran.

The Russian government has dismissed this explanation as a pretext, insisting that Iran poses no such threat and that such facilities threaten Russia’s own security. On the eve of the summit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declared, “If the US is deploying radar in the Czech Republic, this radar will be aimed against us, because there won’t be any other targets.”

Putin, meanwhile, has charged that the US plan represents a resurgence of the nuclear arms race that would inevitably require a response from Moscow, including the retargeting of its own nuclear arsenal toward Europe.

The Russian president went so far as to compare US foreign policy to that of Hitler’s Third Reich and to characterize Washington—not inaccurately—as the “main violator of freedoms and human rights on a global scale.”

The proposal to use Azerbaijan as an alternative site for the proposed US missile shield, placing it under joint US-Russian control, was clearly meant to undercut and expose the Bush administration’s offensive plan. Since then US officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have attempted to deflect the Russian proposal, describing the Azerbaijan base as too antiquated for Washington’s purposes.

Putin used the Kennebunkport meeting to counter these objections, while expanding on the Russian proposal. In addition to proposing a modernization of the Azerbaijan base, the Russian president called for bringing more European nations into the process of deciding how to deploy the envisioned missile shield and offered to provide other facilities in southern Russia.

In light of his proposal, Putin insisted, “There would be no need to place any more facilities in Europe—I mean, these facilities in Czech Republic and the missile base in Poland.”

While describing Putin’s proposal as “innovative” and “very sincere,” Bush made it clear that his administration has no intention of giving up its original plan to insert US nuclear power into eastern Europe. “As I told Vladimir,” he said. “I think that the Czech Republic and Poland need to be an integral part of the system.”

Neither Bush nor Putin made any reference to the other recent flashpoint in US-Russian relations: the US-backed proposal crafted at the United Nations to declare the Serbian province of Kosovo, with its predominantly ethnic Albanian population, independent. Serbia, which lost effective control

over the territory as a result of NATO’s military intervention in 1999, has opposed ceding its claim to the province, proposing a plan for greater autonomy instead. Moscow, whose ties to Serbia predate the Soviet Union and which faces its own conflicts with secessionist territories such as Chechnya, has threatened to use its veto on the Security Council to block the plan. Washington has hinted that it may in turn respond with a unilateral recognition of Kosovo’s independence.

All of the declarations of mutual admiration and claims of “warmth” between Putin and the Bush clan notwithstanding, the Kennebunkport mini-summit only underscored the continuing conflict between US imperialism and Russia. This conflict is rooted in the mounting concerns within Russia’s new ruling elite over the threat posed by US militarism to its own financial and geo-strategic interests.

These tensions are fed, on the one hand, by the growing confidence of this ruling layer and the Russian state as a result of the significant growth of the Russia’s economy based on the wealth flowing from its vast energy resources. On the other hand, there is the mounting perception of the weakening of US power as a result of the deepening debacle in Iraq.

It was 16 years ago that Bush senior—who went fishing with his son and Putin on Monday—occupied the White House at the moment of the Soviet Union’s dissolution and the heady proclamations of a “unipolar world” and the emergence of US imperialism as the world’s sole super-power. Now his son is reaping the bitter results of Washington’s hubris, including the resurgence of a nuclear-armed nationalist Russia whose tense conflicts with US interests threaten to further destabilize the international situation with potentially catastrophic results.



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