

Putin in Tehran: US-Russia rift widens

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The visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Tehran this week has underscored the deepening gulf between Moscow and Washington on a range of issues, in particular the Bush administration's threat of war against Iran over its nuclear programs.

Putin ignored pressure from the US to call off the trip—the first by a Russian or Soviet leader since Stalin's wartime conference with Churchill and Roosevelt in Tehran in 1943. The decision amounted to a diplomatic slap in the face to the Bush administration, which has been pressing for the UN Security Council to adopt a third resolution imposing tougher sanctions aimed at further isolating Iran.

Nominally Putin was in Tehran to attend a meeting of the five Caspian Sea states—Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. The Russian president used the platform, however, to oppose military aggression against Iran. “Not only should we reject the use of force, but also the mention of force as a possibility. This is very important. We must not submit to other states in the case of aggression or some other kind of military action directed against one of the Caspian countries,” he said.

Putin's rejection of “the mention of force as a possibility” is a reference to US President Bush's repeated warnings that “all options are on the table” in relation to Iran—that is, including military force. Given his government's brutal war in Chechnya, Putin's attempts to posture as a man of peace are no more credible than Bush's denials that he is threatening Iran. Behind all their verbal sparring are the conflicting economic and strategic interests of American and Russian capitalism in Central Asia and the Middle East.

At Putin's instigation, the Tehran meeting adopted a declaration pledging that member states would not allow “any country to use their soil for a military attack against any of the [Caspian Sea] littoral states.” The obvious aim is to block the US, which has not only threatened Iran but has established military relations with a number of Central Asian countries, particularly Azerbaijan. Under the umbrella of NATO, the US has helped to arm and train the Azeri military, upgrade a former Soviet airbase and build an Azeri naval presence on the Caspian Sea. CIA Director General Michael Hayden flew into Baku for an unannounced visit on September 28, fuelling speculation that Azerbaijan was being pressured to assist in US war plans against Iran—a role previously rejected by the Azeri government.

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Central Asia has become an arena of intense major power rivalry, with smaller newly independent countries like Azerbaijan engaged in a delicate balancing act. The Caspian Sea alone is estimated to have oil

reserves of up to 49 billion barrels—about half that of the major oil producer Kuwait—and 230 trillion cubic feet of gas. Putin sought to use the Tehran meeting to stymie US plans to build a pipeline across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, which would bypass the existing Russian pipeline network and undermine Russia's clout in Central Asia.

Putin also pointedly backed Iran's nuclear program, declaring: “Russia is the only country that is helping Iran to realise its nuclear program in a peaceful way.” The meeting of Caspian states reaffirmed that all signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which includes Iran, “have the right to generate and utilise nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.” Iran has rejected US allegations that it is planning to build nuclear weapons and insisted on its right under the NPT to build a uranium enrichment plant.

Putin stopped short of announcing a date for the completion of Iran's nuclear power reactor, which is being built by Russian companies. Moscow has previously used a dispute over payment to drag out the project and pressure Iran to comply with UN resolutions. While not relinquishing this lever, Putin exploited his trip to Tehran to the hilt to send a message to Washington that Moscow was not about to allow the US to trample on vital Russian interests in the region. He very publicly met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is increasingly being demonised in the US media, and invited him to make a return visit to Moscow.

The growing gulf between Washington and Moscow has been on open display over the past week in Putin's meetings with top US officials and European leaders. French President Nicolas Sarkozy flew to Moscow last week in an effort to convince Putin to support a new round of UN sanctions against Iran and to end Russian opposition to US and European-backed proposals for establishing Kosovo as an independent state. Moscow has consistently opposed growing Western influence in the Balkans and supported traditional ally Serbia in insisting that Kosovo remain a Serbian province.

Sarkozy's efforts failed on both issues. In what amounted to public dressing down, Putin declared at their joint press conference on October 10: “We have no objective evidence to claim that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons, which makes us believe that the country has no such plans.” The Russian president was simply stating the obvious: that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors have consistently found no evidence of an Iranian weapons program.

But in making the comment, Putin punctured the unsubstantiated character of the Bush administration's claims that have been used to justify UN sanctions against Iran. Whether or not Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons remains unclear. But the White House is

exploiting the issue as the pretext for escalating its confrontation with Tehran in the same way as non-existent weapons of mass destruction were used to justify the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Putin's remark left Sarkozy stammering incoherently in an effort to obscure the obvious differences. Sarkozy and his foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, have both insisted that Iran's weapons program is well advanced and have joined Washington in threatening Tehran with military action. Sarkozy obviously felt on the defensive in Moscow, telling a Russian audience at the Bauman Moscow State Technical University: "I am a friend of the United States. A friend does not mean a vassal."

Responding to Putin's comments, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice shot back on October 11, saying: "There is an Iranian history of obfuscation and, indeed, lying to the IAEA... and there is Iran pursuing nuclear technologies that can lead to nuclear weapons-grade material." Rice deliberately blurred the distinction between "technologies that can lead to nuclear weapons" with actual weapons programs. It is true that Iran's uranium enrichment plant at Natanz could be switched from producing fuel for power reactors to making fissile material for a bomb. Uranium enrichment, however, is permitted under the NPT and carried out by a number of countries that do not have nuclear weapons.

Rice made the comments while flying to Moscow with US Defence Secretary Robert Gates for discussion over another highly contentious issue—US plans to build an anti-missile bases in Eastern Europe. Russia is bitterly opposed to proposals to station 10 US interceptor missiles in Poland and a targeting radar in the Czech Republic by 2010. Moscow has rejected claims that the anti-missile system is needed to counter missiles from "rogue states" such as Iran, insisting instead that the US is aiming to undermine Russia's military capacity.

Talks at Putin's dacha last Friday were described in one account as "rancorous". After keeping Rice and Gates waiting for 45 minutes, Putin prefaced the meeting by declaring: "We hope that in the process of such complex and multifaceted talks, you will not be forcing forward your relations with the East European countries." The US officials made cosmetic proposals to involve Russia in the project, but rejected outright Moscow's calls for the anti-missile system to be put on hold.

In response to the American anti-missile plans, Russia has resumed global flights by its strategic TU-95 "Bear" bombers, which were ended in 1992. Putin has also announced that as of December 12 Russia will suspend its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty—a Cold War agreement that placed limitations on the numbers of troops, tanks, warplanes and other military hardware that could be stationed on European soil.

Having clashed with Sarkozy, then Rice and Gates, Putin flew to Germany last weekend for discussions with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Wiesbaden. At a joint press conference on Monday, the two leaders were clearly at loggerheads. Putin bluntly criticised international efforts to "intimidate" Iran, warning Tehran would not respond to such pressure. "They cannot be frightened, believe me," he declared. Merkel responded by declaring that a new round of sanctions would be necessary if Iran did not halt its nuclear activities.

The political affairs of the last week bear an eerie resemblance to the Great Power rivalry at the turn of the twentieth century that preceded World War I. Conflicts over economic resources, strategic spheres of influence and colonial empires became more bitter and intractable. Clashes over competing interests in key areas of the globe led to complex diplomatic manoeuvring and shifting alliances. Eventually two military blocs were consolidated that came to blows over the Balkans and fought a savage war in which millions died.

It is of course possible that tensions between Russia and the US can be ameliorated. As he has proved in the past, Putin is more than capable of cutting a deal with the Bush administration that would, for instance, sacrifice Iran in return for a freeze on US anti-missile plans in Eastern Europe. But with the White House showing no signs of a compromise on either issue and growing evidence of US military preparations against Iran, dangers of a wider conflagration are growing. The resource-rich regions of Middle East and Central Asia, in which all the major powers are seeking to stake their claim, is emerging as the Balkans of the twenty-first century.

In his typically incoherent fashion, President Bush yesterday blurted out the preoccupations being discussed privately in the upper echelons of government around the globe. Hours after Putin called for renewed diplomatic efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis, the American president dismissed suggestions of a US-Russian rift, and restated allegations that Iran intended to "destroy" Israel. He then added that Iran's nuclear programs had to be stopped "if you are interested in avoiding World War III".

Of course, if there were no rift between the US and Russia, or other countries such as China, why is Bush even raising the issue of world war which, by definition, would involve the major powers? In fact, the deepening crisis of world capitalism is producing an intensifying global competition for raw materials, markets and cheap labour and fuelling the drive toward another world war. In this context, US imperialism is playing the most destabilising role, seeking to offset its long-term economic decline through the aggressive use of its residual military might in Afghanistan, Iraq and potentially Iran.



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