

US-Russian relations remain tense as Obama travels to Moscow

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6 July 2009

US President Barack Obama will meet with his Russian counterpart Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin July 6-8 in Moscow. Despite suggestions from both sides that the talks are part of a new, more co-operative era of US-Russian relations, tensions remain high between the powers.

In March, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met to announce that US-Russian relations would be “reset”, i.e., the antagonistic relations between the administration of George W. Bush and the Kremlin would be overcome. This week’s summit had been framed as part of this process, with some commentators speaking of a “grand bargain” between Washington and Moscow.

On the eve of the meeting, Russia announced that it would permit US military flights over its airspace en route to Afghanistan in a move designed to facilitate the talks. The longer-term strategic interests of the US and Russian ruling elites do not, however, permit this collaboration to be anything more than a temporary measure.

Since the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US has aggressively acted to ensure its hegemony in the region once dominated by the Kremlin. Washington has established a string of military bases from the Baltic Sea to Central Asia that have encircled Russia, while bringing into NATO, the US-led military alliance, a number of former Soviet republics and ex-members of the USSR-led Warsaw Pact.

US machinations in the former-Stalinist states found their most bloody outcome to date in the dismemberment of Yugoslavia. There, Washington and the European powers, acting through local nationalist proxies such as Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, intervened in the break-up of the country in order to carve out spheres of influence. To secure its domination over the region, in 1999 the US and NATO launched an air war against Serbia, justified with claims that Belgrade was carrying out “genocide” in the province of Kosovo.

In 2000, the US backed the so-called “bulldozer revolution” in Serbia, ousting President Slobodan Milosovic. This strategy in Serbia, a traditional ally of Russia, culminated last year when Washington facilitated the unilateral secession of Kosovo from Serbia.

Under the administration of George W. Bush, US imperialism took an even more aggressive stance towards states that had close relations with Moscow. In 2003 and 2004, Washington orchestrated “colour revolutions” in the ex-Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine, bringing to power pro-US regimes committed to opening up their economies to US investment and moving towards NATO membership.

In a deeply provocative move, in 2002 the Bush administration entered into talks with Poland and the Czech Republic to house facilities for a missile defence shield on former Warsaw Pact bases in their territories.

For most of the 1990s Russia was in political and economic chaos following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic “shock therapy” of privatisation that followed. However, in the past decade Moscow has been able to respond more forcefully to US encirclement. Using revenues generated from high prices for Russia’s massive oil exports, the Kremlin has been able to exert more influence in the ex-Soviet region that it regards as its “near abroad.”

This found the most pronounced expression in August last year, when Moscow and Washington came close to military confrontation over Georgia. US-backed Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili ordered an attack on the Russian-dominated breakaway territory of South Ossetia. In response, Russian forces invaded Georgia, in a show of force that took Washington and the European powers by surprise.

The US, which maintains a strong military presence in Georgia, responded by sending a detachment from its 6th Fleet, while the Kremlin ordered the flagship of its Black Sea Fleet to the area.

In a sign of continuing tension over the country, the United States and Russia recently carried out separate war games in the Black Sea off the coast of Georgia. In May, NATO held exercises involving over 1,000 armed forces personnel training for a “crisis response situation.”

Moscow criticized the alliance for heightening tensions in the region and, in a move believed to be a reprisal for Canada’s involvement in the manoeuvres, expelled two Canadian officials based at NATO’s office in Moscow. At the end of June Russian armed forces carried out a weeklong exercise near the Georgian border called “Caucasus 2009.”

Responding to pressures from the Republican Party and from within the Obama administration not to concede anything of substance to Moscow, comments from the White House in the days before Obama flew out attempted to downplay any hint that the US would make significant concessions to Moscow. White House officials signalled that Obama would maintain a “hard line” in negotiations regarding US missile sites in Eastern Europe and eastward expansion of NATO.

At the start of July, the US intelligence web site Stratfor.com reported on leaked discussions within the White House on negotiations with Russia. In these, administration officials discussed conceding some ground to Moscow in order to gain assurances on the Kremlin’s support for the US positions on Iran and cooperation on the occupation of Afghanistan.

“We’re not going to reassure or give or trade ... anything with the Russians regarding NATO expansion or missile defence,” Michael McFaul, senior White House director for Russian and Eurasian Affairs, told the press. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the administration did not “plan to offer overt concessions or even softer reassurance” to its Russian counterpart.

Expressing the tensions with Moscow in unusually undiplomatic terms, Obama told Associated Press last week that Prime Minister Putin—the dominant figure in the Kremlin—was someone with “one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new.”

Suggestions of a new dawn in US-Russian relations have been talked down in Moscow as well, with Reuters reporting a Kremlin spokesman saying that Obama could expect a “chilly welcome” in Moscow as a result of his thinly veiled criticisms of Putin.

“We shouldn’t have excessive hopes” for the meeting, said one senior Russian diplomat. “Despite all this constructive atmosphere, the deeper you get into details, the more difficulties you find,” the official in Moscow stated.

The most reported aspect of the meeting has been the proposed updating of the 1991 Strategic Nuclear Arms Reduction Treaty, which runs out in December. The White House and the Kremlin are widely expected to formally announce a reduction of strategic nuclear warheads to 1,500 for each side from the current upper limit of 2,200.

This is little more than a headline grabber—the reduction essentially gets rid of older nuclear weapons that were due to be decommissioned anyway. The two states will continue to hold over 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. Behind this very limited agreement far greater antagonisms between the countries are brewing.

The so-called ballistic missile defence (BMD) that the US plans to develop, utilizing bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, is of deep concern to Moscow and is likely to dominate discussions between the leaders. Not yet a working system, the shield proposal is designed to knock out long-range enemy ballistics, such as nuclear-armed missiles.

BMD has been dubbed the “son of star wars,” after the proposed Reagan-era anti-ballistic system intended to neutralize the Soviet nuclear arsenal. The missile shield program remained active throughout the 1990s but was heavily promoted under the administration of George W. Bush.

Washington claims that the missile shield is aimed not at Russia but to protect the US and its allies from attack from “rogue states” such as Iran and North Korea. The Kremlin has rejected such claims and stated that the US system is a direct threat to Russia’s national security. The shield could, if successfully implemented, neutralize much of Russia’s land-based ballistic missile system, effectively giving the United States and NATO nuclear dominance over Eurasia.

Halting the development of BMD bases in Poland and the Czech Republic is a priority for Putin and Medvedev in the talks with the US president. The Obama administration has indicated it will continue to develop the missile shield but has indicated that it is open to negotiation with Moscow.

White House officials have hinted that the US would consider allowing some Russian participation in the missile shield, such as the Russian

proposal for the US to station part of the BMD system on Russian soil, as a compromise measure.

Given that Russia is the obvious target of the missile shield, any US concessions to Moscow would be short-term, aimed at meeting pressing military requirements for the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan.

Pentagon planners are acutely aware that, until Pakistan can be relied upon as a base of operations, the best way to sustain the war and occupation of Afghanistan is to route supplies through Russia and the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia, states that retain close economic and diplomatic links to Russia.

Moscow has conflicting interests in Afghanistan. On one hand, the Kremlin fears the spread of Islamist militancy into Muslim-majority areas of Russia, and recognizes the usefulness of Washington’s “war on terror” as cover for its own acts of violent suppression in Chechnya. To this extent, and to win concessions in other areas, the Kremlin may be willing to do business with Obama.

However, the Russian elite does not want the US to be able to dominate Central Asia, using Afghanistan as a base. In February, Russian pressure on the local regime may have contributed to the US Air Force having to quit the Manas Air base in Kyrgyzstan, a key post for operations in Afghanistan. In June, Kyrgyz authorities allowed the US 376th Air Expeditionary Wing permission to continue using the base, at increased rent, in a move seen as linked to renewed US-Russian co-operation over the Afghan war.

There can be little doubt that Kremlin officials are pleased to see the US military bogged down in a conflict that many in Russia—based on the Soviet experience in Afghanistan—see as unwinnable.

The recent Iranian elections and the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program are also likely to be addressed by the US and Russian leaders.

Russia has close economic relations with Iran, especially in the oil and gas, nuclear energy and military fields, and has been reluctant to back the US-led campaign to introduce new international sanctions linked to Tehran’s nuclear program. Moscow is also wary of attempts by the US to destabilize the Iranian government, with Medvedev unreservedly accepting the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad last month.

Moscow’s support for Tehran is not unconditional, however. Iran is a long-time rival of Moscow in the Caucasus and Central Asia regions. Nor does the Kremlin want to see a nuclear-armed Iran. While American engineered “regime change” in Tehran is not in Moscow’s interests, Medvedev and Putin might acquiesce to US pressure to limit Russian cooperation with the Iranian nuclear program and agree to sanctions as part of their negotiations with the Obama administration.

Moscow will also look for concessions regarding the ex-Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine. The US still opposes Russian recognition of the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries. Moscow has large garrisons in both territories and still has troops inside Georgia’s de facto borders from last year’s conflict.

Washington may be willing to overlook this for now in order to win Russian cooperation over Afghanistan and Iran. However, the domination of Georgia and the Caucasus region by the US is essential to Washington’s economic and strategic interests.

US imperialism needs to secure key oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea Basin, through Georgia, to the world market. These routes bypass Russia, which is the main transit country for Caspian energy into Western Europe. Washington and its European allies plan to develop new pipelines through the Caucasus, further undercutting Moscow's control over energy supplies.

The region is also vital to the military-strategic interests of both Moscow and Washington, being the southwestern frontier of Russia as well as a gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East.

The Russian leaders will also attempt to derail American efforts to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, a goal of Washington military planners aimed at militarily encircling Russia. "We are not in any way, in the name of the reset, abandoning our very close relationship with these two democracies," said McFaul, in an equivocal statement that left open the option of putting their applications to accede to NATO on the back burner.

This would also appease leading European members of the alliance, France and Germany, which have resisted Georgian and Ukrainian membership of NATO as too great a provocation against Russia.

While in Russia, Obama is also due to address the pro-"free market" New Economic School in Moscow, in what is billed as a major foreign policy statement. In a similar fashion to the speech he made in Cairo on US-Muslim relations, Obama is expected to offer a diplomatic olive branch to the Kremlin while encouraging "democratic rights" in Russia.

In a move also likely to be seen as threatening to the Kremlin, especially given US backing of previous "colour revolutions," Obama is also scheduled to meet with Russian opposition leaders and former head of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, who is seen as critical of the current Russian leadership.



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